

*The  
Story*  
OF  
**the  
String  
Quartet**

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## introduction

We listen to music every day—whether on the radio, on a walkman or stereo, or performed by live musicians. Some kinds of music can tell us stories: songs have words that tell a story; movie music accompanies images that we see. What about the music we hear that has no words or images? Can instrumental music tell us a story?

When we hear music without words or images, we have our own personal thoughts and feelings. Maybe we feel sad, happy, excited, or peaceful. Maybe the sounds remind us of a place we have been before, a special person, even a cartoon. With instrumental music, how the music makes us feel is the story. It is each person's own story to imagine. There is no right or wrong answer.

Though there are many kinds of *instrumental* music, this book will focus on string quartet music. Music for the string quartet is often used to express personal and powerful ideas in the most beautiful way. This kind of music was created over 200 years ago in the 18<sup>TH</sup> century (the 1700s) and is still being written and performed today.

Instrumental music is music performed on musical instruments without text or words.



A string quartet is like a family of four instruments. There are two violins, one viola, and one cello. The viola is a little larger than the violin, and the cello is the largest of all. The bigger the instrument, the lower the sound; the cello has the deepest voice and the violin has the highest. Together the four instruments have musical conversations, like a family at dinner or a group of friends talking about the weather, about the government, about their feelings, or about life in general.

While the string quartet talks, another conversation is taking place between the composer, the performers, and the listener. The composer has an idea and writes music to express it; the performer interprets that idea as he/she performs the music; and the listener hears the idea in the music and interprets it again in his/her own way. This is how the original idea continues to grow with each individual's participation. Conversation—the communication between composer, performer, and listener—can truly take place only in live performances.

When we imagine what the music is saying, we become part of the performance. It is essential to the music that a musical idea is heard and interpreted. Therefore, we must listen actively. This makes the music complete. (If a tree falls in the woods, but no one is around, did it make a sound? If no one is listening, is there really music?)

A composer often tells us about what was happening when the music was written: the structure of government, social trends, cultural traditions, even the fashions of the times. Many composers lived a long time ago, or in countries we may never have visited. However, the stories they may have been trying to tell us can still be heard and understood today. This is because we can identify with music personally, through our experiences and through our imagination. We can imagine our own stories.

## *Beginning the Story...*

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### Questions to Consider

What sort of voice is produced by each of the instruments in the string quartet? Do you associate particular character or personality traits with the sounds of each instrument?

What constitutes a good conversation? What makes a good conversationalist? Do the roles of talker and listener both get equal billing in a conversation? Are you able to play both roles in a conversation, or do you give more weight to one or the other?

When you are in a conversation, are you aware of how it progresses? Do you consciously shape the course of your conversation? How do you signal a change of subject?

What is the purpose of conversation? Do you think all conversations have a purpose? Do you think a conversation with an interesting person is a worthwhile activity?

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During the mid-1700s most European countries were governed by a single dominant ruler. These monarchs may have been called king or queen, prince or princess, emperor or empress, czar or czarina. The royalty and wealthy aristocrats enjoyed many privileges and luxuries. Formal music was written and performed only for members of the privileged class in castles, palaces and stately homes. There were no public concert halls, and no one could buy a ticket to attend a performance. The less privileged played and sang traditional music taught by their parents or grandparents and sang hymns in church.

Since the main goal of formal music at this time was to entertain, aristocrats employed *composers* who lived at their estates and wrote music specifically for them. One of the most famous of these 18TH century composers was a man named Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809). For most of his life, Haydn worked for Prince Nicholas Esterhazy, master of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Austria. Haydn composed whatever music the Prince demanded, conducted performances, trained and supervised all the musicians, and repaired the instruments. Not until much later in his life was Haydn able to write music he wanted to write.

Haydn wrote music for many different kinds of *musical ensembles*, but he preferred the ensemble of two violins, a viola, and a cello. It may have been easy for Haydn to write for this combination of instruments because it resembles the four choral voices: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. He called his compositions string quartets. Many people believe that Haydn wrote the first music specifically for string quartets. For this reason, and because he was very warm and friendly, he is often referred to as “Papa” Haydn.

Haydn's string quartet music can be compared to a conversation between four people in the manner of the 18TH Century aristocracy. In the 18TH century, architecture and fashion were highly ornamental, and social conversation was refined, restrained and witty. Aristocratic society valued elegance and good

manners and considered open expressions of emotion vulgar. Much music of the period reflected these attitudes in its structure. One violin played a beautiful, ornate melody while the other instruments played a light, elegant *accompaniment*.

The dominant voice of the first violin is typical of this period in string quartet music. Imagine having a conversation with three other people in which one person does all the important talking and the rest talk quietly in the background. Listen for this in some of Haydn's earliest string quartets.

The period of the late 1700's is often called the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. Scientists investigated the world around them and based their explanations of natural phenomena on logical analysis of their observations. This belief in the power of human reason began to replace the stories and superstitions that had previously dominated Western thought. A key term used at this time was cause and effect, which required people to look for rational scientific explanations. Philosophers and authors also began to use logic and reason to look at humanity as a whole, and wrote about a society in which people were no longer divided by predetermined social classes. Faith in human reason led to increased importance of the individual and the growth of democracy.

As Haydn continued to write for the string quartet, his music became more dramatic and imaginative. He began to incorporate a style called fugue, which had been used extensively by earlier composers. In this kind of musical conversation, one person states an idea, then the next person states the same idea while the first person elaborates on the original theme. The fugue continues until each person has had a chance to state the original idea. In this kind of string quartet music, each instrument has an opportunity to play the melody. Therefore, each instrument is treated as an individual, a striking change from the earlier form which featured the first violin.

An accompaniment is a part of a piece of music designed to serve as background and support for more important parts



Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

A composer is a person who writes music

A musical ensemble is a group of musicians performing together

# the Polite conversation

1752: Benjamin Franklin conducts his first electricity experiment

1758: French philosopher Voltaire writes satirical novel, *Candide*

1760: First Conestoga Wagon built, later used to cross the Oregon Trail

George III of England crowned king

1769: Spain sets up the first mission in San Diego, marking the beginning of California colonization

A patron is a person who supports someone with money, gifts, or endorsement



Mozart the child prodigy

This development in music is consistent with the displacement of monarchies and the growth of democracy throughout Europe and in America. However, artists were still creating music and other works of art for their wealthy *patrons*.

At the same time Haydn was writing string quartets for Prince Esterhazy, a young composer named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was also busy writing music. By age six he was performing all over Europe, by nine he had written his first symphony, and by twelve he had completed his first opera. In total, Mozart wrote over 600 compositions, including 68 string quartets, although he died when he was only 36. He is generally regarded as one of the world's great musical geniuses. Like many geniuses, Mozart was often stubborn and impulsive, and he loved to play jokes on people. His brilliance also inspired terrible jealousy among many of his musical colleagues.

However, Mozart was greatly impressed and inspired by Haydn's music, and he composed a set of six quartets which he dedicated to Haydn. Papa Haydn was present at the first performances of these quartets and told Mozart's father, "Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me, either in person or by name."

Mozart's music combines beautiful, simple melodies with drama and emotion. The co-existence of lightness and seriousness is what makes his music extraordinary. This contrast was also the essence of his own personality, which he expressed through his music.

The ideas of the Enlightenment were changing politics, religion, and education, and reinforcing a belief in the power of the individual. During this time, the acquisition of wealth could lead to social advancement. To show their refinement, the middle class developed an interest in the arts. Public concerts were held for the first time and could be attended by anyone with the price of a ticket. Composers began to write for this new, broad and diverse audience, rather than to suit the tastes of a particular noble family or a church official.

### Questions to Consider

"The Age of Reason" valued order, harmony and clarity. Can you hear the musical rendering of these ideas in Haydn's music? Does the music communicate order and harmony to your ears?

One of the major changes occurring in the 18th century is the reconfiguration of social order. Consider how the structure of Haydn's string quartets changed, from one instrument (violin) dominating the conversation to a more equal participation by all of the instruments. Do you think Haydn was influenced by the changing patterns of the social order to deliberately alter his style? Or do you think it was subconscious?



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)



Typical 18th century court dress

1774: First Continental Congress assembles in Philadelphia to boycott British goods

1776: Thomas Jefferson writes The Declaration of Independence

1784: George Washington purchases the newly-made "ice cream machine"

1775: Volta invents the electric battery

1777: Vermont becomes first state to abolish slavery

1788: American Constitution ratified

1792: Denmark is the first country to forbid slavery

1803: Louisiana Purchase doubles the size of the United States

1789: French Revolution

1791: Bill of Rights constructed

Napoleon crowns himself emperor of France

Both the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) brought about dramatic changes in the structure of governments and the balance of political power in America, France, and throughout Western Europe. The United States was founded on the idea that government should be run “by the people and for the people,” and the slogan of the French Revolution was “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” (Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood).

Continuing what Mozart had begun, musicians in Europe composed music to satisfy their creative impulses and to appeal to their new audiences. Performing groups and orchestras who were not employed in an aristocrat's court were organized to present public concerts. Their audiences went to concerts to listen to the music rather than to have it serve as background for their social events. Music performed at these concerts was also different from the music they might have heard in church, although much magnificent church music was often written by the same composers.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) is perhaps the greatest composer to write music for his own self-expression, not for a particular person or a specific event. String quartets written by Haydn and Mozart followed a standard musical form, which had become familiar and predictable. Beethoven broke the rules and created his own forms; each quartet is unique. People did not easily accept these radical changes in music. Beethoven's music is full of emotions like anger, fear, passion and sadness so intense that audiences were at times both puzzled and embarrassed; they were not used to hearing so much raw emotion expressed in public. When people first heard Beethoven's music, they were outraged, and many walked out of the concert halls.

Musicians laughed at his String Quartet in F major, thinking that Beethoven was playing a joke on them. “Surely you do not consider this music,” said the first violinist. Beethoven replied, “Not for you, but for a later age.” He was extremely confident in his musical abilities and even arrogant toward people of his era. He refused to conform to the social conventions of his day: he was extremely messy and unkempt in both



Ludwig van Beethoven  
(1770–1827)



Two

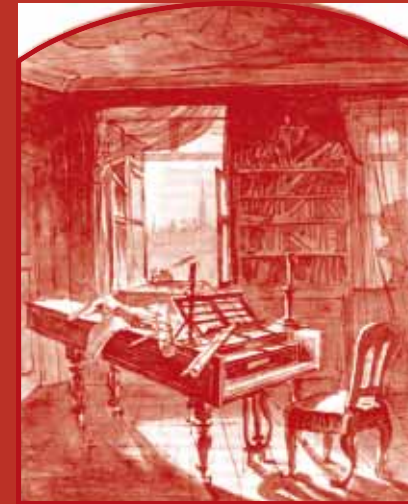
# The Emotional Conversation

his housekeeping and physical appearance; he had great difficulty getting along with people or holding civil conversations.

Perhaps, this was an expression of anger and frustration brought on by an illness which caused him to lose his hearing. Beethoven's musical conversations began to reflect his frustration with life. They have a sense of impatience, anger, and confrontation. Many of his compositions make bold musical statements, followed by silence. This *motif* almost dares the listener to follow Beethoven into unfamiliar emotional territory.

By the time he was 48, Beethoven had completely lost his hearing. Yet he wrote some of his greatest music in the decade of his deafness. Another famous composer described one of Beethoven's last string quartets by saying, “This is the dance of the world itself: wild joy, painful lament, love's transport, utmost bliss, misery, rage, lust, and suffering; lightning flashes, thunder growls...”

A motif is a recurring subject, theme, idea, etc., especially in an artistic work such as a symphony



Beethoven's study a few days after his death



### Questions to Consider

Many consider Beethoven the greatest musical mind of all time. Why do you think that is so? Does his music affect you? How? Beethoven struggled with great crises in his personal life, and is much admired for overcoming his trials to compose great music. Does his compelling history add to (or detract from) your appreciation of his music?

Beethoven taps into a depth of feeling and elicits an emotional response from his listeners; yet he was personally unable to connect with people around him. What do you make of Beethoven's inability to "hold a civil conversation" with others? Do you think Beethoven's musical conversation compensates for his lack of conversation with others?

What do you do when you cannot think in words? How do you think Beethoven uses the language of music to express himself? Do you have a song or a piece of music (or another work of art) that for you conveys a feeling/emotion/mood that cannot be expressed in words?

The late 18TH century was an age of profound change throughout Europe and the New World. The social and political pressures that had ignited the American and French Revolutions kept alive a spirit of individualism which gave birth to the Romantic philosophy of art. Although there is no general agreement about what the word Romantic in this context means, we know that it does not have anything to do with Valentines, candle lit dinners or love songs. The term probably comes from the French word, *romans*, which were stories or legends especially popular during the Middle Ages. The Romantics longed for a bygone era before the Age of Reason.

Romantic art was haunted by a sense of longing or an endless pursuit of some unattainable object or goal. In a world dominated by the pursuit of science and industry, Romantic artists often saw themselves as separate from the mainstream of society. They did not create their art for individual patrons but rather for posterity, or for some imagined audience that would someday appreciate their genius. They helped create the stereotype of the suffering artist. In fact, many of them did suffer from illnesses that were incurable in those days, and they often died quite young. Faced with the reality of early death, the Romantics believed that only their art would survive and live forever.

Beethoven lived nearly 60 years, so the body of his work can be identified as both Classical and Romantic. His early work is more concerned with form, while the music he wrote during the middle of his life reflects the free expression valued by the Romantics. Like the other Romantic artists, Beethoven believed that he wrote, not for his contemporaries, but for a later age.

The short lives of German composer Franz Schubert (1797–1828) and English poet John Keats (1795–1821) perfectly illustrate the tragic genius of the Romantic artist. Many 19th century composers were interested in literary as well as musical expression, and many Romantic poets and novelists wrote about music with insight and passion. The general public did not appreciate Schubert's music, and Keats's work was viciously attacked by literary critics. Yet



Franz Peter Schubert  
1825

# CHAPTER 3 ROMANTICISM

## A PASSIONATE CONVERSATION

both worked constantly while struggling against poverty and fatal illnesses, and each produced a huge body of work.

Best remembered for his song writing, Schubert wrote over 600 songs for voice and piano. These songs, known as Lieder, set the standard for the merging of poetry and music. Schubert wrote all of his songs in German, though he used words from Romantic poets of many countries.

Schubert also blended melodies from his song compositions into his instrumental works. He wrote string quartets and other chamber music mainly for his friends to enjoy playing at home. These quartets are not as full of emotional outpouring as Beethoven's late quartets were, yet they show the longing and suffering that is a common theme of Romantic art. Schubert's String Quartet in D minor is subtitled "Death and the Maiden," based on the narrative from his own song of the same title. The song tells the story of a young woman who is visited by Death in several disguises, and the string quartet attempts to tell the story through music alone. Instrumental music based on a poetic or narrative subject became very popular during the Romantic era and is now known as program music.

Because many of the Romantic artists knew they would not live long, death was a prevalent theme in their work.

Schubert died at age 31, having written nearly 700 different musical works, including several string quartets. On his tombstone is written yet another expression of Romantic longing, "Music has here buried a rich treasure but still fairer hopes."

Robert Schumann (1810–1856) was Schubert's successor in merging poetry and music through Lieder. He is known as the central figure of musical Romanticism and represented the quintessential Romantic composer with his emphasis on self-expression and interest in literary associations. Throughout his life Schumann was involved both as a writer and a critic of Romantic literature. He also wrote extensively about the music of his age and was one of the first to recognize the genius of fellow composer Johannes Brahms.

Schumann's personal life also was full of drama and tragedy. He had studied to become a concert pianist. However, at age 22 he developed a muscular weakness in his hands which was probably a side-effect of the mercury treatments he endured in an attempt to cure syphilis. Realizing that he could not devote his life to performing, he began to compose music and reached his most productive period of work within a few years. During this time, he had fallen in love with his teacher's daughter, Clara Wieck, when she was just 15 years old. Her father refused for five years to permit their marriage, so the two went to court to seek legal permission. They won their case in the fall of 1840, and married almost immediately. Clara had a brilliant career as a concert pianist and composer, and in fact was much more famous during their lives than her husband. Sadly, her reputation died when she did, and her work is only recently being studied and appreciated. The Schumanns had a large family and were widely known, but unfortunately, Robert's mental and physical condition deteriorated until he was placed in an institution for the insane and lived there for two years until his death in 1856.

Schumann wrote three complete string quartets in 1842. These quartets show the influence of Beethoven's Romantic period in their general emotionalism and in their musical details. Some of the melodies in these quartets even sound like Beethoven's melodies.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) was the major composer of chamber music, including piano trios, string sextets, and several string quartets during the 19th century, and is considered Beethoven's true musical successor in the Romantic era. His music exudes powerful emotion, yet it maintains some of the structure and order of earlier German composers like Haydn and Mozart.

Brahms received his first musical training from his father, who played bass in the orchestra of his native city, Hamburg, Germany. Like many musicians who became composers, he showed exceptional skill on the piano at an early age, and began performing in public when he was 10 years old. An American talent agent heard him at one of these early concerts, and tried to book the child prodigy on a U.S.

Clara Wieck Schumann (1819–1896) was considered a child prodigy by the time she was 10, both as a pianist and a composer. Her musical talent was held in the highest regard not only in Germany, but throughout Europe. She married fellow composer/musician Robert Schumann when she was 21. The traditional roles of wife and mother demanded that Clara care for her husband and eight children at the expense of her own work. However, she continued to compose and perform as time permitted. After her death, her 66 compositions were largely forgotten as women were left out of most history and musicology textbooks. Only recently has there been a resurgence of interest in her life and work.



Robert and Clara Schumann 1850



Johannes Brahms as a young man

1830: Native Americans living east of the Mississippi displaced by Indian Removal Act

1837: First US college for women, Mount Holyoke College, is founded

1838: First public school instruction in music

Daguerre takes first photograph

1841: Saxophone invented

1844: First telegraph message transmitted

First Women's Rights Convention

1848: Gold Rush in California

1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe writes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

A gypsy is a member of a nomadic Caucasoid people of generally dark complexion, who migrated originally from India, settling in various parts of Asia, Europe, and most recently North America. Gypsies are noted as entertainers, especially musicians and dancers. They were often favored as court musicians. They usually improvise and most often their ensembles include guitar, lute, cymbalom, drums, cello, and violin.

concert tour. This scheme was quickly stopped, and Brahms continued his studies in piano, music theory, and composition.

When Brahms was 15, the Austrian army suppressed an uprising in Hungary, and hundreds of Hungarian refugees made their way to Hamburg. Many were headed to North America, but many others stayed in Hamburg. The passion of their *gypsy* music and their exotic beauty started a craze for Hungarian fashion, food and art. Brahms heard gypsy music for the first time. The influences of this music can be felt in many of his compositions. Schubert and Brahms were among the earliest composers to incorporate melodic material from cultures they viewed as exotic.

Brahms idolized Schumann, and traveled to Dusseldorf to meet him. When he later learned of Schumann's nervous breakdown and subsequent death, he fell madly in love with Schumann's widow Clara, who was 14 years his senior. Though it is not known if they were ever lovers, Clara remained an important friend throughout Brahms's life. She introduced him to people who would help advance his career. Like Beethoven, he was never quite successful in mingling with the rich and famous, and in fact, expressed disdain for them, saying "A fellow who pleases the aristocracy is bound to be a good-for-nothing."

Brahms preferred his small circle of devoted, life-long friends. Many people found him reserved. Unlike many of his Romantic contemporaries, Brahms's life was not filled with great personal tragedy or drama. His music reflected his private nature; though Romantic, it balances emotion and self-expression with form and structure. His three string quartets, the product of 20 years' effort, demonstrate his determination to master the form. Each quartet is unique. The first (Op. 51, No. 1 in C minor) seems to be modeled after one of Beethoven's, and the second (Op. 51 No. 2 in A minor) is more reminiscent of Schumann with several passages of gypsy music. Brahms' third string quartet, Op. 67 in B, is written in a style uniquely his own.

## Questions to Consider

A novel feature in the music of this period is the addition of dramatic elements in the string quartet, especially the drama of the individual. The artist struggles with his own passions, effectively conducting a conversation with himself. How does this inward turn affect the music? How does this change the dynamic among the instruments in the string quartet?

Do you think the inward turn of the Romantics is related to the profound social and political changes occurring throughout Europe? How are they related? How does the music (or art) respond to the times? Consider this example: Beethoven originally dedicated his "Emperor" concerto to Napoleon; but when Napoleon declared himself emperor of France and disappointed Beethoven's political idealism, Beethoven scratched out the dedication.

1853: First US railroad connects New York to Chicago

1861: U.S. Civil War begins

1864: Lewis Carroll writes *Alice in Wonderland*

Serfs emancipated in Russia

1859: Charles Darwin writes *Origin of Species*



## Chapter

# 4

## Expressions of Cultural Identity



Bartók gathers folk songs from Slovak peasants, 1907

German composers dominated the story of the string quartet until the 19th century. The Classicists, like Haydn and Mozart, originated the form, and the Romantics, including Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, began to develop it in more individualistic ways. As the 19th century progressed, the Romantic ideal of personal self-expression expanded to include expressions of cultural or national identity as well. European countries began to assert their national identities politically and artistically. Artists and intellectuals became interested in national causes and cultural themes. For many composers, incorporating local folk tunes into larger compositions became one method of creating a national music.

Folk music expresses the experiences and traditions of a culture, orally passed from generation to generation. Folk songs can describe many different ideas or experiences, from the landscape and geography of a country, to a people's occupations and hobbies, to their personal relationships. Folk songs also demonstrate the sounds, colors and patterns of a culture's language. String quartet composers from the late 19th and early part of the 20th century often used folk melodies and motifs to introduce the sounds and rhythms of their cultures into a standard musical form.

The composer Bedrich Smetana (1824–1884) from Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), is today considered the father of Czech music. Smetana's father was a successful master brewer and his family was comfortably well off. Because of this, Smetana had opportunities to study music at an early age. At 4 he demonstrated great skill at the piano, and two years later he turned to the violin. As a composer, Smetana often wrote program music, or music that told a story. The spread of nationalist culture across Europe led to Smetana's interest in telling **Slavic**, and specifically Czech, stories through his music.

Smetana's first string quartet is titled, "From My Life." Its four movements tell the following personal story through music:

## A Patriotic conversation

I. The composer's love of art in his youth, the yearning and the foreshadowing of approaching troubles; II. A brief, happy time from his youth; III. The happiness of his first love for the girl who later became his wife; and IV. The recognition of national Czech music and its success, and the ringing in his ears, signaling the onset of deafness and ultimately, complete physical debilitation. Along with telling Smetana's own life story, this quartet also includes rhythms and motifs from Czech dance music. Smetana placed less importance on folk songs as the source for creating a national Czech music than later composers did. Like the Romantics, his compositions expressed more personal ideas and themes, but these came to be accepted as the definition of Czech music.

Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904) was the second major Czech composer of the 19th century. After graduating from music school, he played viola in an orchestra conducted by Bedrich Smetana, who helped show him how to make a living as a musician and composer. Early on in his career, Dvořák was a popular composer among the Czech people. Outside of Czechoslovakia, Johannes Brahms helped to establish his reputation. Dvořák was invited by the wife of a wealthy New York businessman to come to the United States and head a new music school. He did this for a few years, and during this period he heard and became influenced by American folk music. Fragments of both Czech and American folk songs can be heard in many of his compositions.

Dvořák's String Quartet in F op. 96 is commonly known as the "American." It was written during his visit to a small town in Iowa, and one of its musical themes is based on a bird song he heard in the Iowa woods. Other quartets by Dvořák incorporate the syncopated rhythms and patterns of repetition common to Czech dumka, or slow sad folk ballads.

Dvořák successfully absorbed the characteristics of Czech folk songs into all his works. By combining qualities of Roman-

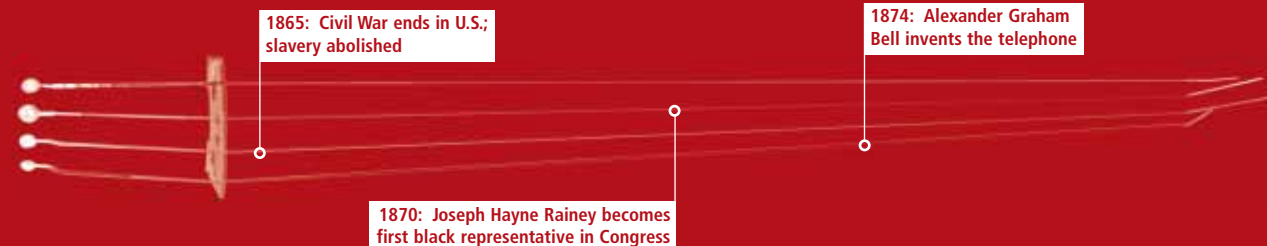


Bedrich Smetana



Antonin Dvořák

A Slav is one of a race of peoples in eastern, southeastern, and central Europe. Southern Slavs include Bulgars, Serbs, Croats, Slavonians, Slovenes, etc. Western Slavs include the Poles, Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, etc. (Western Slavs)



tic music with the musical elements of his native culture, he created a national and international music that appealed equally to traditionalists and those who looked for change.

In contrast, composer Bela Bartók (1881–1945) methodically studied the folk music of his native country, Hungary. He traveled around the Hungarian countryside collecting and recording local folk songs, which were only known by the small number of people who regularly sang them. Bartók then based his compositions on these folk tunes, adding highly developed techniques of music theory and performance to these rustic melodies and rhythms.

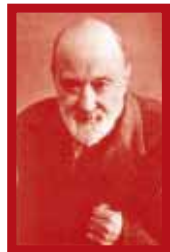
Bartók's string quartets are very difficult, challenging both the instrumentalists and the audience. Bartók explored a variety of colors, sounds and rhythmic energy in his quartets by using several string techniques to the fullest. He often employed col legno, striking the string with the wood of the bow, and what is now termed as Bartók pizzicato, where the string player plucks the string, making an explosive crack as the string rebounds against the instrument. Like the great quartets of Haydn and Beethoven, Bartók's quartets have attained an undisputed place in the string quartet repertory.

Another composer who challenged audiences with his unconventional harmonies and melodies was the North American, Charles Ives (1874–1954). Unlike most composers, Ives had two careers. He spent most of his adult life as a successful insurance executive, and he often composed music while on his way to work, on the commuter train from Connecticut to New York City. With his music, Ives tries to unsettle his listeners, to make them sit up and listen as well as to react strongly.

Ives is considered the first important distinctively American composer. The son of a well-known marching bandmaster, Ives grew up in Danbury, Connecticut. His father experimented with musical acoustics and layers of musical sound by having several marching bands perform simultaneously in different locations



Bela Bartók



Charles Ives

within the Danbury town square. As a boy Ives listened and played music amid this overlapping conglomeration of sound. These early experiences became his musical norm and served as his inspiration when he began to compose. The blending of melodies, harmonies and rhythms together in unlikely musical situations reflects the overlap of sound Ives heard in his youth

Like many Romantic composers, Ives encouraged listeners and performers to relate his music to specific images. The manuscript for his Second String Quartet bears the following text:

String quartet for four (men) who converse, discuss, argue (politics), fight, shake hands, shut up, then walk up to the mountainside to view the firmament.

This string quartet's musical conversation contains heated exchanges and calming resolutions. Like other nationalist composers, Ives incorporated the folk songs that he grew up singing, as well as those common to many North Americans. Fragments of traditional American songs including "Hail Columbia" and "Turkey in the Straw" can be heard in this quartet.

Smetana, Dvořák, Bartók and Ives introduced the rhythmic emphasis, sound and harmonies of their native cultures into their music. Each used composition as a means to express his national identity. These composers successfully created a musical language for their communities that was both familiar and completely innovative, paving the way for a future era of cultural exchange in music.



Charles Ives during his days on the Hopkins Grammar School baseball team, 1894

1876: Mark Twain writes *Tom Sawyer*

1883: Automobile motor patented

1884: Mark Twain writes *Huckleberry Finn*

1886: Statue of Liberty unveiled in New York harbor

1885: Brooklyn Bridge built

1888: Tutti-Frutti Gum becomes first chewing gum sold from vending machines

## Questions to Consider

Nationalism influenced all aspects of European politics and culture during this period. Is there something specifically Slavic in the music of Smetana and Dvořák? Can you identify the elements of folk music in their compositions?

Some historians suggest that writers, artists, and composers exerted great influence on how people conceived of their national identities and communities during this period. In effect, they claim that prominent cultural players helped create the idea of nation, allowing actual nations such as Germany and Italy to emerge as viable political entities in the 19th century. Does this argument seem convincing to you? Do you think culture, and cultural events, can affect politics? Can you think of any current examples?

The early nineteenth century was marked by growth in industry and commerce. This period is known as the **Industrial Revolution**. Urban landscape, industry and job opportunities attracted people from the countryside. Cities like Paris became major industrial and economic centers. Urban environments inspired painters, musicians and writers. The work of artists at this time reflected a combination of contemporary city life with the familiar calming atmosphere of the country.

A literary movement which flourished in France in the late 19th century was known as Symbolism. Using words symbolically rather than literally, poets wrote to evoke a sensory, not just an intellectual, response from their readers. Poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud created prose and verse that would challenge their readers' emotions. Although the following poem by Baudelaire is a translation from the French, the translated words still convey the immediate sense of the images described.

Some of these poems were very short, intended to evoke an immediate and powerful emotion. Others were longer, intended to sustain and develop images and feelings. Composers of music did the same thing.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in England and later spread to other countries, marked a major change in economic and social organization. Hand tools were replaced by machines that could produce items much faster and in mass quantities. Large establishments with their factories and assembly lines took the place of individual skilled tradesmen.

## Correspondences

*Charles Baudelaire*

The pillars of Nature's temple are alive  
and sometimes yield perplexing messages;  
forests of symbols between us and the shrine  
remark our passage with accustomed eyes

like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else  
into one deep and shadowy unison  
as limitless as darkness and as day,  
the sounds, the scents, the colors correspond.

There are odors succulent as young flesh,  
flutes, and green as any grass,

# CHAPTER FIVE IMPRESSIONISM— A MOODY CONVERSATION

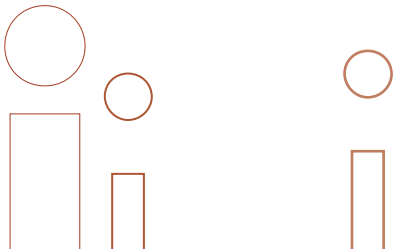
as incense, amber, benjamin and musk,

possess the power of such infinite things

while others-rich, corrupt and masterful

sweet as

to praise the senses' raptures and the mind's.



The Origins of Impressionism: The art world was shocked in 1863 when Edouard Manet exhibited a painting that would inspire the Impressionist style. Manet painted everyday subjects using direct, bold brush strokes. His first painting to come to public attention, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, depicted a woodland picnic with two fully-clothed men and a nude woman, seated on the grass, gazing boldly at the viewer. The painting was bitterly attacked by art critics, but it inspired a group of young painters who later became known as the Impressionists.



Claude Debussy

Many painters in late 19th century France worked in a style similar to that of the Symbolists. We call this artistic movement **Impressionism**. Instead of attempting to copy nature, these artists painted their impressions of it. Often in Impressionist painting, the entire scene is blurred and forms are not clearly outlined. The canvas looks like a patchwork quilt of colors covered in daubs of paint that form recognizable images only when viewed from a distance.

Impressionist painters were fascinated with light— the way light reflected off objects, how lights changed during different times of day, and how light created different moods. In fact, the movement is named for a painting by Claude Monet, called *Impressions of Sunrise*. Monet also studied light in several series of paintings. One series shows a simple haystack at six different times of the day, showing six different qualities of light, and six different impressions or moods. The Impressionists' fascination with light inspired them to use color in unconventional ways. People had difficulty finding beauty in this new style of painting, just as they had struggled with Beethoven's new style of string quartet writing.

Some of the music written in 19th century France has also been called Impressionism. Composers began writing music in a characteristically French manner, in which they expressed emotion through long sustained harmonies and musical phrases, rather than through dramatic changes in melody, harmony or rhythm.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was the first composer to be labeled an Impressionist, although he didn't feel he belonged in this category. The son of poor shopkeepers, he showed extraordinary talent at the piano by the age of 6. Somehow, his parents were able to provide young Debussy with piano lessons. His first teacher was the mother-in-law of the poet Paul Verlaine. Debussy's talent was so unusual that at age 11 he was accepted as a student at the Paris conservatory. This was similar to being admitted to university. However, after six long years of gruelling piano study, he failed to pass the examinations that would allow

him to pursue a career as a pianist. Having left the small French town where he grew up to become part of the artistic scene in Paris, he began composing music in the company of other musicians, visual artists, poets, and writers. A number of Debussy's compositions are based on Verlaine's poems.

In 1889 Debussy went to the World Exposition in Paris with his friend and student Maurice Ravel (1875–1937). Musical and theatrical groups from all over the world gathered there to perform their works. Debussy and Ravel were impressed by the unusual sounds they heard, particularly the Indonesian gamelan orchestra, which is comprised of gongs and other percussion instruments. Excited by hearing something totally new and different, the two composers immediately began to experiment with producing complex rhythmic sounds on traditional string instruments.

Debussy composed a substantial amount of music for piano and orchestra, but only one string quartet. In the quartet, bits of melodies surge in and out like the tides, passing from one musician to another, creating a mood in the same way the Impressionist painters did with their daubs of **color**.

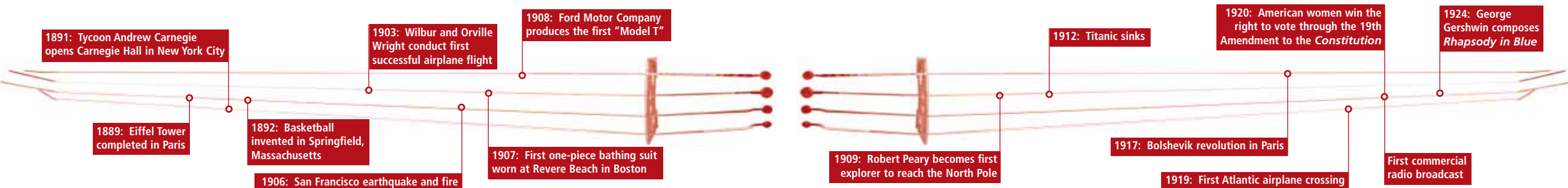
Ravel's string quartet imitates Debussy's closely. It is flowing and richly colored, but it is also detailed and clearly structured, and has a more exotic use of rhythm. The Debussy and Ravel string quartets are often paired together in concerts and on recordings.

The Impressionist composers and painters, along with the Symbolist poets, created works that defined French culture in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Though Debussy's and Ravel's string quartets form only a small part of all the music they composed, the new direction established by these quartets led to striking changes in musical composition in the 20th century. The strong cultural statements they made, and the inclusion of other cultural expression set the stage for greater exploration of cultural themes in music and art.



Maurice Ravel

Color in music refers to the characteristic quality of a sound, independent of pitch and loudness. For example, the color of a sound may be described as warm and soothing or harsh and jarring.



## Questions to Consider

The industrial age brings us closer to contemporary urban life as we know it. Does the music of the post-industrial age sound more familiar to you? Does the music reflect a more modern way of thinking?

Impressionist painters like Monet play with light, color, and shading, giving us a radically new way of seeing. Can you hear the way an Impressionist composer like Debussy plays with color and shading? How does he evoke and/or express different emotions?

Much string quartet music composed in the 20th century reflects the diversity of cultures, environments, and circumstances that surround us. Ravel and Debussy heard gamelan music for the first time at the World Exposition in Paris in 1889. Shortly after this, the American inventor Thomas Edison invented the tape recorder and phonograph, which brought recorded music to every continent. Radio and television began to broadcast both live and recorded performances, and satellite technology further extended the reach of these broadcasts. Consequently, 20th century composers are able to incorporate music from any culture into their string quartet writing. In spite of these technological advances, the same four instruments have stayed together since the days of Papa Haydn. Today's string quartets also perform music composed for other instruments.

Computer technology has changed the way in which music is composed and published, and in many cases has also influenced the sounds of the music being written today. New compositions can be faxed or e-mailed almost anywhere in the world in a few minutes, and many composers now incorporate electronic sounds into live performances. Through digital technology, a string quartet ensemble can record a work simultaneously even if they are in four different places in the world; it will sound as though they are sitting in the same room. It is possible for people all over the world to join in a jam session on the internet and play with music's superstars.

American composer George Crumb (b.1829) has lived through this explosion of technology. He currently teaches music composition at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Crumb's compositional style is best known for its blending of sounds from Western and non-Western cultures. He combines instruments such as Tibetan prayer stones, Japanese Kabuki blocks, alto African thumb piano (mbira), and Chinese temple gongs with vibraphone, tambourine, cymbals and tamtams. The music he writes also explores the mystical qualities and meaning of life experiences.

Many composers incorporate 20th century global events and culture into their music. George Crumb's string quartet *Black Angels*:

1929: New York stock market crash and the beginning of world-wide economic depression

1933: Hitler granted dictatorial powers; first concentration camps erected in Germany

1936: Spanish Civil War begins

1937: Golden Gate Bridge opens

an International Conversation

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*Thirteen Images from the Dark Land*, for electric string quartet, written in 1970, is probably the first quartet to be inspired by the Vietnam War. Crumb states about the quartet:

The work draws from an arsenal of sounds including shouting, chanting, whistling, whispering, gongs, maracas, and crystal glasses...Black Angels was conceived as a kind of parable on our troubled contemporary world. The work portrays a voyage of the soul. The three stages of this voyage are Departure (fall from grace), Absence (spiritual annihilation), and Return (redemption).

These unusual and amplified sounds are very different from the soothing music of the 18th century court. The music is meant to be as difficult to confront as war itself.

Another major American composer of string quartets, Elliott Carter, speaks directly of confrontation as a form of response. We cannot yet judge whether or not this will be a defining quality of late 20th century music.

Many traditions continue to thrive. Composers have been writing pieces with specific ensembles in mind since the beginning of the string quartet. Quite often in today's international music community, ensembles commission works by composers from around the world. These ensembles often work very closely with the composers whose pieces they perform in order to understand fully the composer's musical ideas.

In 1992, the San Francisco based Kronos Quartet recorded a CD entitled *Pieces of Africa*. This sampling of traditional African sounds and song mixed with a classical string quartet is just one example of today's cultural fusion in music. The composers who wrote *Pieces of Africa* for the Kronos Quartet were born in various countries of Africa. In addition to the music they grew up with, all the composers have had some kind of Western classical music experience or training.



Elliott Carter



Kronos Quartet

1941: U.S. enters WWII after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor; Japanese Americans sent to internment camps.

1944: Allied invasion of Normandy, France; Hitler surrenders

1945: U.S. drops atomic bomb in Japan; World War II ends

1948: Mahatma Ghandi is assassinated

1949: Communist government is established in China

On this recording, the members of the quartet play multiple instruments in addition to the strings. The composer Obo Addy joins in with the quartet on his piece, *Wawshishijay*, playing instruments such as the donno, brekete, pretia, aketse, and the gidi which define the sounds and textures of his native Ghana.

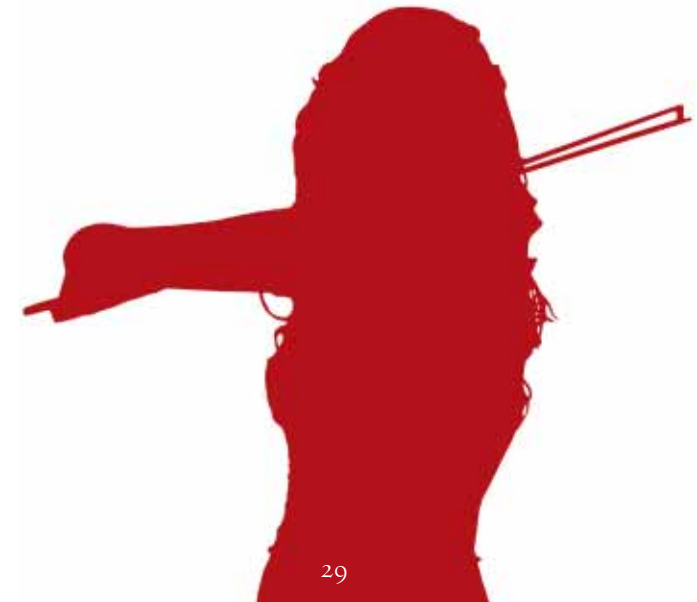
The Oakland, California based Turtle Island String Quartet adds jazz, folk, bluegrass and improvised styles and techniques to the standard string quartet medium. Their recordings feature songs and short pieces they themselves have composed. The Turtle Island musicians often play like a jazz quartet—introducing the melody, and then having each member take a turn improvising and varying the melodic theme. The cellist often functions as both the bass and rhythm sections of a jazz combo, while the upper strings usually solo above the bass line. The members of the quartet have all been trained as classical musicians, and they have successfully expanded upon this training to produce the kind of sound that has become their signature style.



Obo Addy



Turtle Island String Quartet



1954: U.S. Supreme Court decision outlaws school segregation

1951: Color T.V. is introduced

1957: USSR launches Sputnik, first earth orbiting satellite

1960: US military action in Vietnam begins

## Questions to Consider

Have you detected any pattern in the way musicians (and artists in general) interact with their society? The composers of our study responded to their society and times in various ways—integrating new elements and reflecting social change, as well as challenging social norms. While their work transcended their time, these individuals were definitely of their time. Events of great political and social significance inevitably influence culture, but cultural forces also profoundly affect political and social discourse. Is there a way to determine how these forces impact one another?

Innovators are often considered rebels because they break with older, inherited tradition, although they are deeply influenced by these traditions. In fact, to break with tradition, one must know it well. How do you think the composers we have studied negotiated between their roles as engaged citizens of their society, and as challengers of accepted values?

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1961: Peace Corps established

1963: President John F. Kennedy assassinated

1964: The Beatles achieve international fame

1969: First man on the moon

1968: Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated

Berlin Wall erected to separate Eastern and Western Germany

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1971: In response to Vietnam protests, voting age is lowered to 18

1975: End of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam

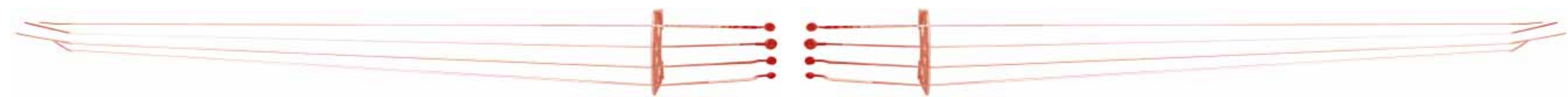
1974: President Nixon resigns as a result of Watergate scandal

Sandra Day O'Connor becomes first female appointed to Supreme Court

1981: Scientists identify Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- accompaniment** part of a piece of music that serves as background and support for more important parts.
- arco** playing a stringed instrument by drawing the hair of a bow across the strings.
- bow** a long rod with horsehairs stretched from one end to the other, used for playing stringed instruments
- cello** the second largest member of the string family, and the lowest sounding member of the string quartet
- chamber music** music performed in a small concert hall or room by a small group of musicians
- classical music** formal, artistically sophisticated music that endures over time.
- col legno** playing a stringed instrument with the wooden part of a bow.
- composer** someone who writes music.
- folk music** anonymous music passed on by oral tradition
- impressionism** an artistic style in which daubs of paint or tonal colors are used to convey moods and impressions in painting and music
- instrumental music** music performed on instruments without text or words.
- melody** a tune, or succession of notes that together form a complete musical statement.
- motif** a recurring theme, subject or idea in art, music, literature or dance.
- musical ensemble** a group of musicians performing together.
- pizzicato** playing a stringed instrument by plucking the strings.
- romanticism** a movement in art, literature and music in which form is subordinate to content. Romanticism emphasizes imagination and emotion, and celebrates nature and freedom of the human spirit.
- string quartet** a musical ensemble of two violins, one viola, and one cello; or a piece of music written for this combination of instruments.
- viola** the second smallest member of the string family. The viola makes middle range sounds, comparable to that of the human voice.
- violin** the smallest member of the string instrument family. The violin makes the highest sounds of the string family.



## RESOURCES

### Websites:

[www.asq4.com](http://www.asq4.com)

[www.kronosquartet.org](http://www.kronosquartet.org)

[www.tisq.com/home.html](http://www.tisq.com/home.html)

[www.cypressquartet.com](http://www.cypressquartet.com)

### Movies:

Amadeus

Immortal Beloved

The Madness of King George

The Red Violin

### Recordings:

Alexander String Quartet—The Complete Beethoven Quartets

(Arte Nova Classics)

Any recording by the Alexander String Quartet

Any recording by the Kronos Quartet

Any recording by the Turtle Island String Quartet

Any recording by the Cypress String Quartet (under the Alexander)

