



# CHAMBER MUSIC

## Great to the Very End!

by Tom Rosenberg

There is so much amazing repertoire in the realm of chamber music that it is hard to know where to begin in discussing it. So, why not start at the end! Unlike numerous other career paths, composers often reach their peak towards the end of their lives. This article is about the last chamber works by some of the greatest composers of the past three centuries. All of these pieces are monumentally great and show their creators to be at their pinnacles of artistic expression, despite the fact that several of them were near death when composing these pieces. Even though they are amazing masterpieces, and certainly among the greatest pieces by the greatest composers, many of them are not all that well known to the general classical music listener. Perhaps this article will get many readers to get to know these works better, or to even hear them for the first time.

### **Mozart: Viola Quintet in E-flat, K.614 (finished on April 12, 1791)**

Mozart wrote several wonderful quintets for string quartet and extra viola. He himself was a very good violist. This is his last completed chamber work, and one of his very last pieces before he died in December. Despite his poor health and rather desperate financial status, there is very little to indicate these serious conditions in the mood of this piece. Although the writing is very virtuosic and difficult, from the start it is joyous, often witty and even ebullient. Just the same, it is structurally brilliant and complex. The slow movement is a set of beautiful and rather complex variations with a sometimes daring and almost shocking use of dissonance. The Minuet is lively, and the very special trio is a beautiful landler. The finale brings the work to a rollicking and joyous conclusion.

### **Haydn: Opus 76 (1797) and Opus 77 (1799).**

Haydn is generally considered the composer who developed the medium of the string quartet, and he wrote over eighty of them! Haydn had by this time become a world-famous musician, having completed his

hugely successful second trip to London. Opus 76 has six amazing quartets, each different, highly creative, ground breaking and all masterpieces. Commissioned by Count Joseph Erdody they are sometimes called *The Erdody Quartets* and include several of his now most famous quartets with nicknames, including *The Quinten* (Opus 76, #2), *The Emperor* (Opus 76, #3) and *The Sunrise* (Opus 76, #5). Opus 77 was commissioned by Prince Lubkowitz. It is not known for sure why Haydn only wrote 2 quartets in Opus 77. Some say he was in failing health and was more interested to write large works for chorus and orchestra. There is also some conjecture that the young up-and-coming Beethoven's 6 Opus 18 quartets (also commissioned by Count Lubkowitz) were seen as superior and more bold than Haydn's work, possibly encouraging him to stop writing for the genre.

### **Beethoven: Opus 135 (Oct 30th, 1826) and "new" last movement of Opus 130 (Nov, 1826)**

These two works were completed just months before Beethoven died. After Beethoven wrote the *Ninth Symphony*, there are only five major pieces that he wrote, all of them string quartets and known collectively as *The Late Quartets*. Opus 135 is the last of these five great quartets.

Some of the music in these tremendously creative and complex works is considered by many the greatest music ever written, and some of the greatest examples of human thought. In comparison to the others, Opus 135 is less experimental in form and shorter in length. It has a relatively relaxed mood and in many ways is far less intense than the previous four quartets. The last movement is curiously entitled "Der schwer gefaste Entschluss" ("the difficult decision") with the question "Es muss sein?" ("Must it be?") and the forceful answer: "Es muss sein, es muss sein!" ("It must be—it must be!") There is more than one explanation for this curiosity: some in letters from Beethoven's friends, and more than one account from Beethoven himself. One of those is a letter Beethoven wrote to his pub-

lisher that may or may not get to the truth. It contains the following: "Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be my last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not get myself to compose the last movement... But...in the end I decided to compose it and that is the reason I have written the motto: "The difficult decision—Must it be?—It must be, it must be!"

Beethoven's very last chamber music composition was written at the request of his publisher to replace the original last movement of the Opus 130 string quartet. The original final movement, known as *The Grosse Fuga* is a complex and often violent fugue over seventeen minutes in length. It was just too avant-garde for the music public at the time. Even though it is still today considered by many to be difficult listening, it is now considered one of Beethoven's most creative and astonishing works and is often played as the Finale of Opus 130 as originally intended. Beethoven was convinced to publish it separately as a stand-alone piece and compose a new finale. The replacement finale, written in the month following the completion of Opus 135 is much lighter in mood than *The Grosse Fuga*, but still sophisticated in its structure and use of thematic elements heard in previous movements of the quartet.

### **Schubert: Cello Quintet in C major (September, 1828)**

Many chamber music lovers consider this their favorite piece. It is, to be sure, one of the greatest works of chamber music with gorgeous melodies, magnificent textures and at times, tremendous drama. It was finished just weeks before Schubert died, not premiered until twenty-two years after his death, and finally published in 1853. It can't be adequately described, and so if you don't know it, give yourself a gift and listen to it as soon as possible!

### **Mendelssohn: String Quartet in F minor, Opus 80 (September, 1847)**

The composer's last chamber work was written in the summer after his sister had suddenly died. Mendelssohn was shocked by

her death and poured his sorrow and frustration into this powerful, beautiful, highly emotional and relatively dark work. He really never recovered from the trauma of his sister's death, dying of a stroke at the age of 38, just weeks after finishing this quartet.

**Brahms: Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Opus 115 (1891)**

In 1890, Brahms had made it known that he was done composing. However, in the spring of the following year, he heard a performance by the clarinetist Richard Muhlfeld that's so inspired him that he started to compose again. The results are four great pieces featuring the clarinet: two great sonatas, a trio for piano, clarinet and cello, and his final major chamber music composition, the *Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet*, Opus 115. It is a very substantial and sophisticated work of great beauty and wonderful writing for all the instruments, but especially exploring the range and color of the clarinet. It is as beloved by today's audiences as it was at its highly successful premiere with the legendary Joachim Quartet and Richard Muhlfeld in December, 1891.

**Dvorak, Quartet in A-flat, Opus 105 and Quartet in G major, Opus 106 (December, 1895)**

Dvorak spent almost three years in the USA living in New York City where he was director of The National Conservatory. In the summers, he lived in the small Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. He wrote a lot of wonderful music during this period including the *New World Symphony*, the

so-called "*American*" *String Quartet* and his magnificent *Cello Concerto*. Shortly before sailing back to his homeland in spring 1895, he also started the *Quartet in A-flat major*. Once he got home, he started the *Quartet in G major*, Opus 106 which he completed first, followed shortly thereafter by the Opus 105 *Quartet in A-flat major*. These two works were essentially composed at the same time, but technically, the Opus 105 quartet is really the last one completed. In any case, both of these quartets are less known to the music listening public than some of his other music, yet they are truly some of his greatest achievements. The use of melody, color, harmony and texture are masterful and uniquely his. With highly demanding part writing, they are big, bold, gorgeous and exciting works.

**Bartok: String Quartet #6 (November, 1939)**

Written at the onset of WW II, this is a piece of searing and disturbed sadness. It also is the last work Bartok completed in Europe before emigrating to the United States. Each movement begins with an introduction marked "mesto" ("sad"). Each "mesto" is longer than the next before yielding to the main movement. The short introduction to the first movement by the solo viola quickly yields to a relatively lively conversation. The second mesto yields to a march with sinister overtones. The third mesto leads into a sardonic and sarcastic movement entitled *Burletta* (Burlesque). The mesto of the final movement turns out to be the entire movement, fully expanding and full of sorrow and anguish. Before

ending, there is a final statement of the mesto theme by the solo viola as at the beginning of the first movement before the quartet (and perhaps Bartok's world) ends in quiet resignation.

**Shostakovich: String Quartet #15, Opus 144 (1974)**

Written when Shostakovich was seriously ill, this quartet is a powerful and devastating musical experience. Comprised of six very slow movements including a funeral march, there is little doubt about the mood of the composer. There is a precedent for a piece of slow and serious movements for string quartet that like Shostakovich's 15<sup>th</sup> quartet that also is a profound experience. It is Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*. The difference is that Haydn's work glows with a warmth and sense of worldly wonder, whereas Shostakovich #15 is painfully bleak and both personally and universally tragic.

All of the works discussed above have been beautifully recorded many times, and now excellent video performances can also be found on YouTube. Better yet, hear them live in concert. Check them out!

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