

Programme note by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Piano Quartet in E \flat Op 47 (1842)

Sostenuto assai — *Allegro ma non troppo*

Scherzo. Molto vivace

Andante cantabile

Finale. Vivace

Coming after his 'Liederjahre' of 1840 and the subsequent 'Symphonic Year' of 1841, 1842 was Schumann's 'Chamber Music Year': three string quartets, the particularly successful piano quintet and tonight's piano quartet. Such creativity may have been initiated by Schumann at last winning, in July 1840, the protracted legal case in which his ex-teacher Friedrich Wieck, attempted to forbid him from marrying Wieck's daughter, the piano virtuoso Clara. They were married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday.

1842, however, did not start well for the Schumanns. Robert accompanied Clara at the start of her concert tour of North Germany, but he tired of being in her shadow, returned home to Leipzig in a state of deep melancholy, and comforted himself with beer, champagne and, unable to compose, contrapuntal exercises. Clara's father spread an unfounded and malicious rumour that the Schumanns had separated.

However, in April Clara returned and Robert started a two-month study of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. During June he wrote the first two of his own three quartets, the third following in July. He dedicated them to his Leipzig friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn. The three quartets were first performed on September 13, for Clara's birthday. She thought them 'new and, at the same time, lucid, finely worked and always in quartet idiom' - a comment reflecting Schumann the critic's own view that the 'proper' quartet style should avoid 'symphonic furore' and aim rather for a conversational tone in which 'everyone has something to say'.

After an August visit to Bohemia (where the Schumanns called on Metternich), the Piano Quintet followed in mid-October and tonight's Piano Quartet in November. Both pieces, according to *Grove*, show a tension between symphonic and traditionally chamber writing as 'chamber music came to occupy an intermediary position between private entertainment and public display'. Although the Quintet is played more often than the Quartet, the latter is in many ways the better piece.

Schumann, admirer of Beethoven that he was, works his way towards the main theme of the first movement. The brief opening *sostenuto* introduces and explores its first four notes. Then, in the *Allegro*, the strings shorten these notes and speed them up drawing an approving comment in running quavers from the piano. Finally, the cello discovers what they have all been looking for and gives us the exuberant theme (illustrated). The exuberance, helped by the running quavers, continues throughout the movement albeit interrupted twice by the return of the *sostenuto* passage.

cello

mf espressivo

tr

The *Scherzo* alternates with two contrasting *Trios*. The theme of the lightly scampering, Mendelssohn-like *Scherzo* is related to the running quavers of the first movement. The

first *Trio* is based on a gently descending scale, while the second *Trio* slows the action even more with bar-long syncopated chords interrupted by scampering.

The cello again gets to introduce the theme in the *Andante*, but in a characteristically Schumann way, as if you had just opened the door into a room where the movement had already started. The cello gets 16 glorious bars to itself before the violin takes over and the cello answers canonically after a 2-bar delay. There is a subdued interlude in the remote key of G \flat followed by the viola finally getting to play the theme, accompanied by genially playful passage on the violin. During this the cello is silent to allow the C-string to be tuned down a tone to B \flat to enable the movement to end with a long, low, *pianissimo* B \flat octave. Above this drone, like the *Sostenuto* opening of the first movement, the end of the *Andante* anticipates in slow motion the three chords that start the last movement.

After an opening flourish of these three chords rounded off by descending semiquavers, the viola expands these semiquavers into a fugal theme. These busy scales are contrasted with, on the one hand, a creeping, semitone-spaced rising and falling chromatic scale and on the other with a wonderfully skippy canonic variant of the movement's opening chords which leaps within and between the instruments (illustrated).

The whole movement is packed with ideas and energy and it gallops to a heroic end with a final version of those three opening chords.



The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violin, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is written in 3/4 time and the key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The Violin part is in the treble clef, the Viola part is in the alto clef, and the Violoncello part is in the bass clef. The music consists of five measures. In the first measure, the Violoncello has a whole rest, while the Violin and Viola play a descending eighth-note scale. In the second measure, all three instruments play a descending eighth-note scale. In the third measure, the Violoncello plays a descending eighth-note scale, while the Violin and Viola play a descending eighth-note scale. In the fourth measure, the Violoncello plays a descending eighth-note scale, while the Violin and Viola play a descending eighth-note scale. In the fifth measure, the Violoncello plays a descending eighth-note scale, while the Violin and Viola play a descending eighth-note scale.