March 27, 2026 Kleio Quartet

Anton von Webern (1883-1945) Fünf Sätze Op 5 (1909)
As a child Anton von Webern (his parents were minor aristocrats and he only dropped the 'von' following an edict from the Austrian state in 1915) studied cello and piano. His first compositions were settings of songs, but while a music student at the University of Vienna between 1902 and 1906 he also composed various instrumental pieces including a single movement work, now known as his String Quartet. In 1904, he answered an advertisement placed by the short-of-work Arnold Schönberg inviting composition pupils. Schönberg was to become the most important influence on Webern's life – his admiration bordered on infatuation. In the 1920s Webern became a more punctilious practitioner of Schönberg's 12-tone system than the master himself. But in 1905 such duodecanal rigours were unheard of, and master and pupil merely pushed provocatively on the constraints of tonality.

Katherine Yoon writes:
“With the Fünf Sätze (“Five Movements”), composed in 1909, Anton Webern stepped decisively into a new musical language. Gone is the lush Romanticism of his earlier Langsamer Satz; in its place we encounter a world of extreme concentration, fragmentation, and expressive intensity. Each movement is astonishingly brief - together they last little more than ten minutes - yet within this compressed span Webern achieves a remarkable emotional and sonic range.

“Written during a period of profound artistic transformation in Vienna, and under the influence of Arnold Schoenberg, the work abandons traditional tonality. Instead of long-breathed melodies and conventional development, Webern constructs the music from tiny gestures: a sighing interval, a sudden pizzicato, a flicker of tremolo, a whispered harmonic. Silence plays an equally vital role. Phrases are separated by stillness, creating a sense of suspended time and heightened listening.

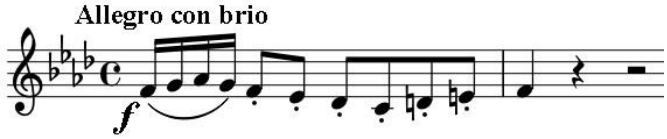
“Despite its brevity, the quartet is far from abstract. Webern described these pieces as intensely personal, even confessional. The second movement, for example, unfolds as a fragile lament, while the fourth explodes in nervous, volatile energy. The final movement retreats into a hushed, almost weightless atmosphere, as though the music were dissolving into air.

“Webern’s meticulous attention to timbre is central to the work’s impact. Muted strings, harmonics, *sul ponticello* effects and sudden contrasts of register create a kaleidoscope of colour. Each note is placed with precision; nothing is decorative, and nothing is superfluous.

“In the Fünf Sätze, Webern reimagines what a string quartet can be: not a grand architectural structure, but a sequence of concentrated emotional flashes - music distilled to its essence, where every gesture carries extraordinary weight.”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Quartet in F minor, Op 95 (***Quartett Serioso***) **(1810)**
Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso - Più Allegro
Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato – Allegro

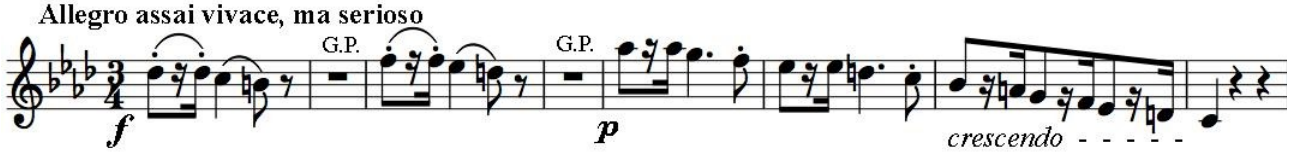
“NB. The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public... Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance, I would compose them to this purpose occasionally”. So wrote Beethoven in 1815 to Sir George Smart, his London promoter, not only anticipating the sophistication of this evening's audience but also safeguarding the quality of performance (the aristocracy hired better players) and trying to insulate himself from uncomprehending rejection. The F minor is a “serious” quartet: “*not a ‘pretty’ piece, but it is terribly strong - and perhaps rather terrible… Everything unessential falls victim, leaving a residue of extreme concentration, in dangerously high tension*” (Joseph Kerman). The *serioso* quartet is an isolated bridge between the middle quartets (Rasumovsky quartets and Op 74 “Harp”) of the 1800s, and the final set of late quartets from 1825. The work experiments with various techniques that will appear in the late quartets and is contemporary with the *Egmont* overture and with Napoleon's 1809 invasion of Vienna.



Beethoven challenges the listener from the start with this grim unison outburst and pause, answered by 3-bars of angry, spiky octave leaps in the dominant (C minor). The original outburst is repeated on the cello up a semitone and in the major (a “Neapolitan” modulation). It is answered by a more conciliatory slow theme from the violin, but ominous rapid ascending figures in the cello force us back to the initial outburst. And that is just the first 17 bars: enough to challenge even aristocratic connoisseurs. This brutally condensed, tempestuous movement is all over in less than 5 minutes.

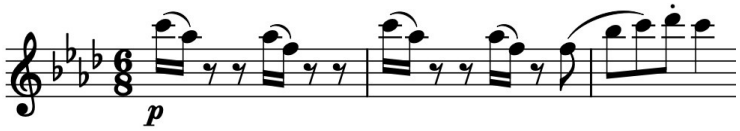
The *Allegretto* inverts the threatening, ascending scales of the first movement to a gentle stepping descent from the cello, introducing a calm theme related to that of the first movement. The viola then introduces a new theme, which is taken up as a fugue.

The third movement, based on the *Scherzo* form, starts, like the first, with an abrupt, angry challenge, just one bar and a pause; it is repeated, more demandingly, followed by a descending scale in dotted rhythm on a sinister *crescendo* (*illustrated*).

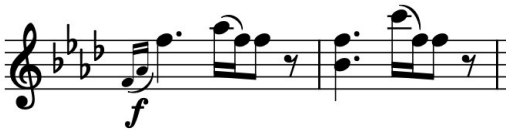


This angry section is developed and repeated, but then dissolves into a tranquil slow melody from the second violin, caressed by first violin arpeggios, initially in the minor, then the major. The contrast is repeated, but finally anger, at a faster tempo, slams the door on the movement.

All seems well with the world in the expressive slow introduction to the last movement. But this optimism is threatened by the worried agitation of pairs of *piano* semiquavers fromthe first violin (*illustrated*).



The threat level ratchets up on subsequent returns of this figure with an increasingly agitated accompaniment, and terrified octave and tenth leaps in the first violin. But then, a more hesitating, *pianissimo*, return of the figure heralds a *forte*, reassuring modification (*illustrated*). The tempo



increases to *Allegro*, the key shifts to the major and the threat is forgotten in a final triumphantly rising scale.

Kaija Saariaho (1952-2023) *Terra memoria* for string quartet (2006)

Kaija Saariaho grew up in Finland learning violin, piano and guitar at school and graphic design and music at university. Unenthusiastic about the strict serialism she was exposed to at Freiburg she was attracted by the French spectralists Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey. She studied computer music at IRCAM in Paris under David Wessel manipulating slow transitions of blocks of sound produced by a combination of traditional and electronic means. Read more about her in this Guardian article by Tom Service.

Katherine Yoon writes:
"Kaija Saariaho's Terra Memoria was written in 2006, shortly after the death of a close friend, and is dedicated "to those departed." Rather than portraying grief in a dramatic or overt way, the piece explores memory itself - how recollection softens, distorts, and reshapes what once felt vivid and immediate.

"The title, meaning "land of memory," suggests a landscape through which the listener moves. Fragments of melody emerge and dissolve; textures blur at the edges; gestures seem to return altered, as if seen through a shifting light. Saariaho was deeply influenced by spectral thinking - an approach that treats sound as colour and resonance as structural material - and throughout the quartet she creates a luminous, constantly transforming sound world. Harmonies shimmer and refract, often built from closely spaced intervals that generate a sense of warmth and inner vibration.

"There are moments of tension and agitation, but the prevailing atmosphere is one of introspection and suspended time. Lines intertwine gently, overlapping and echoing one another, as if memories are being passed between voices. The music does not offer resolution so much as acceptance: a quiet acknowledgement that remembrance is both fragile and sustaining.

"Terra Memoria stands as one of Saariaho's most intimate chamber works - a meditation on loss, presence, and the subtle transformation of memory into sound."

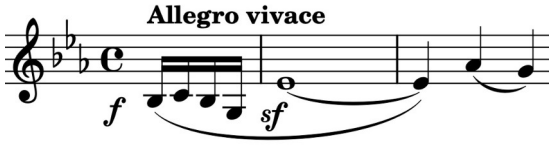
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) String Quartet Op. 44 No.3 in E-flat (1838)
Allegro vivace
Scherzo – Assai leggiero e vivace
Adagio non troppo
Molto allegro con fuoco

Felix Mendelssohn was born into an intellectual and affluent household: his grandfather Moses was the pre-eminent Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment, and both his father and mother's family were bankers. Felix and his sister Fanny were outstandingly precocious and were driven hard by their parents – their day started at 5 am at the latest. In 1818 the 9-year old Felix publicly performed a Dussek piano concerto from memory, and his first datable composition was performed in Berlin the same year. His copious early compositions outshone even those of Mozart. When Mendelssohn was 12 he played for Goethe who had also heard the young Mozart. Goethe was impressed: *"...what [Mendelssohn] already accomplishes bears the same relation to the Mozart of that time*

that the cultivated talk of a grown-up person bears to the prattle of a child." At the age of 16 he produced his first undoubted masterpiece, his String Octet Op 20, incidentally at the same time as a metrically accurate German translation of a comedy by Terence which was published by his tutor the following year!

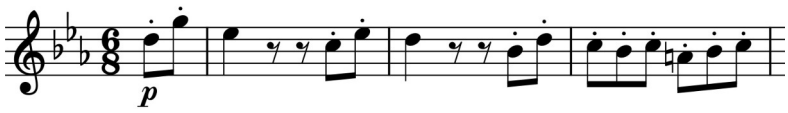
Mendelssohn's string quartets fall into four groups: an early (even for Mendelssohn) quartet from 1823; the Op 12 & 13 quartets written in 1829 & 1827 respectively; the three Op 44 quartets including tonight's from 1837-8, and finally the Op 80 quartet, a personal outpouring of grief written in 1847 in response to Fanny's unexpected death, and only a few months before his own. The A minor Op 13 quartet appeared shortly after Beethoven's late quartets were published; Mendelssohn studied them closely and incorporated many compositional techniques especially from Op 132 & 135 into his Op 13, giving us an interesting link between "classical" and "romantic" quartet writing.

Mendelssohn's E-minor quartet no 2 was the first of the Op 44 to be composed. It was the spring of 1837and Felix was on his honeymoon with his young French bride Cécile (10 years his junior and *"fresh, bright and even-tempered"* in Fanny's view). Tonight's quartet in E-flat was next; he finished it in February 1838. Shortly afterwards it was given its first performance by a quartet led by Ferdinand David who coincidentally had been born a year after Mendelssohn in the same house in Hamburg.



The first movement opens as it means to go on with a forward-driving upbeat of semiquavers (*illustrated*). This figure forms the backbone of the movement being tossed around between the players, repeated in finger-taxing runs and contrasted with a less breathless melodic line.

The *Scherzo*, marked very light and lively, is again dominated by rapid passage work taxing all the players, with an ingenious fugal episode based on a variant of the movement's opening theme (*illustrated*).



The genial *Adagio* in A-flat opens with a succulently discordant A-natural in the first violin leading into a tender melody that might even have been written on his honeymoon. The energy of the first two movements returns in spades in the finale, initiated as in the first movement by pushy semiquavers. The first violin bears the brunt of the *Molto allegro con fuoco* passage work, perhaps grateful that all those youthfully-practised arpeggios still lie under the fingers.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin who gratefully thanks the Kleio's second violin Katherine Yoon for her extensive contributions.