Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)  String Quartet Op 18 no 4 in C minor (1801)

Allegro ma non tanto
Andante scherzoso quasi Allegretto
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegro – Prestissimo

Beethoven was in his late 20s and living in Vienna when he wrote his six Op 18 string quartets. Uneducated (“I do everything badly except compose”), rough-mannered, but with an alluringly intense personality and of undoubted musical genius, he had managed to secure the patronage, both as composer and pianist, of Vienna's cosmopolitan aristocracy. Chamber music was an important part of their diet, and Beethoven composed piano trios (Op 1) and string trios (Op 9), violin sonatas (Op 12) and piano sonatas (Ops 2, 10 & 14) before publishing in the 'serious' medium of the string quartet. As models he had Mozart, who had died the year that Beethoven arrived in Vienna from Bonn, and Haydn, from whom Beethoven (“the Great Mogul” as Haydn called him) had, briefly, had lessons in composition. Whilst their influence is undeniable, Beethoven, already in these early chamber works has his own voice, with tantalising seeds of his later style clearly apparent.

Like today's Shostakovich quartet, this Beethoven quartet is in the key of C minor – the Beethoven key, the key of the Pathétique sonata, the Fifth Symphony and his last piano sonata. It is typically the key of the scowling Beethoven, “defiantly seizing fate by the throat”. He had already written two trios and a piano sonata in this key and they actually correspond better to the defiant stereotype. This quartet opposes dark, minor episodes with considerably more genial ones in the major.

The quartet opens with a quietly threatening theme starting with a rising fourth (illustrated), which resists the temptation to get louder until a full-blown threat emerges in harsh chords. The second violin then introduces a more optimistic (starting with a rising major sixth) but similarly shaped theme (illustrated). The threat levels of the opening theme are increased in the development, and the second theme joins in, in a minor version. The major returns only to be forcefully banished by the indubitably threatening ending.

The quartet has no real slow movement: Beethoven gives us something which is as much a Scherzo as it is an Andante. The second violin introduces the cheerful fugal subject (on a rising fourth) which forms the basis for the whole delightful movement.

The Minuet and trio return to the major/minor contrasts of the first movement using a theme that is again derived from the latter's opening. The last movement shows what Beethoven had learned from Haydn. It is a Rondo, based like the first movement on a minor, troubled, theme from the first violin and a related major one from the second violin (on a rising fourth, illustrated). At the end of a final faster section, C major triumphs in abrupt chords.