Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Piano Quartet in E♭ 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.

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♭ 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♭ to enable the movement to end with a long, low, pianissimo B♭ 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.