

The BobCasts



The Original Fab Four: The Birth of the String Quartet

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *The Original Fab Four: The Birth of the String Quartet*.

Let us consider *ensembles*, and no, I'm not talking about smartly matching clothes and hand-bags but musical *ensembles*.

When we think about vocal ensembles—I don't know about you, but such thoughts occupy a really disproportionate amount of my waking day—we generally think in groups of *four*. For example, the basic and time-honored distribution of mixed-voice ensembles into soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Barbershop quartets and Gospel quartets. Such household name vocal groups as the Carter Sisters, the Chordettes, the Oak Ridge Boys, the Four Freshman, the Four Seasons, the Four Tops, the Mills Brothers, the Mamas and the Papas, Manhattan Transfer, and the Weavers; vocal quartets all.

Why this prevalence of musical foursomes? And it's not just vocal ensembles. The most common configuration for a rock 'n' roll band or pop group is likewise a quartet, from the "Fab Four" (the Beatles), to Metallica, to the Who, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Led Zeppelin, Queen, the Doors, Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, Kiss, the Talking Heads, and Creedence Clearwater Revival. (Good god; I almost forgot to include Weezer and Megadeath.)

In the world of so-called concert music, the string quartet has been the pre-eminent genre of chamber music for 250 years. Put simply, no other specific grouping of instruments has shown such longevity; and no other particular grouping of instruments has been lavished with such an extraordinary repertoire.

The prevalence in Western musical practice of ensembles with four distinct musical parts has its roots in *tonal harmonic practice* as it evolved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The basic harmonic unit in Western tonality is the *triad*, a chord/harmony consisting of three different pitches. The minimum number of musical parts necessary to accompany a melody using tonal harmonies—using triads—is FOUR: the melody itself plus the three notes of the accompanying triads. From such a simple conceptual beginning did great things evolve!

The String Quartet

A string quartet is two things: a performing ensemble—a grouping of instruments—and a musical composition written for that ensemble.

That ensemble consists of two violins—a first violin and a second violin—a viola, and a cello. These four instruments represent, respectively, the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass of the ensemble. The string quartet, as we understand it today, consists of these four distinct instrumental voices, with each instrumental voice being a fully empowered musical individual. More than any other single composer, it was the *tireless* Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) who forged this modern notion of the string quartet as four individual string players who collaborate to create a whole greater than its parts.

The direct ancestor of the string quartet was the Baroque era *trio sonata*. Despite the designation “trio”, a “trio sonata” is in fact a composition for four instruments: two soprano instruments (most typically two violins), one bass instrument (most typically a cello), and the ubiquitous (during the Baroque era) “basso continuo” instrument, usually a harpsichord.

Let’s sample a trio sonata by Archangelo Corelli (1653–1713). According to musicologist Donald Grout:

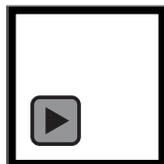
“Corelli’s trio sonatas were the crowning achievement of Italian chamber music in the late seventeenth century. He was exceptional among Italian composers of his time in that apparently he wrote no vocal music whatsoever; he transferred the national genius for song to the violin, the instrument that most nearly approached the expressive lyric quality of the human voice.”

Let’s hear a bit of Signore Corelli’s Trio Sonata Op. 3, No. 2 of 1689. One: note that it employs that most typical trio sonata instrumentation of two violins, ‘cello, and continuo. Two: notice, please, the rock steady beat so typical of Baroque era instrumental music as well as the predictable, almost motoric harmonic accompaniment in the continuo part.



Corelli Trio Sonata Op. 3, No. 2, movement 4 (1689)

(From a purely technical point of view, the instrumentation employed by Beatles—and almost every other four-person rock group for that matter—was the same as that of a Baroque era trio sonata: two soprano stringed instruments (two electric guitars), a bass stringed instrument (an electric bass) and a continuo instrument pushing the music along at a rock-steady pace (the drums).

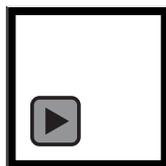


Lennon/McCartney, Birthday (1968); The Beatles

Back, please to the Baroque era trio sonata. Popular though this ensemble was during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it was no longer considered to be relevant by certain

young Italian composers of the 1730s and 1740s. Such pre-classical, or so-called “Rococo” Italian composers as Giovanni Sammartini (1701-1775), Niccolò Jommelli (1714-1774), and Baldassare Galuppi (1706-1785) sought to create a more lyric and “natural” sounding music, music free from what they considered to be the unnecessary complexities and often-motoric rhythms of the Baroque style. To that end, these composers—who were the de facto inventors of the string quartet—took the trio sonata and eliminated the rhythmically and harmonically inflexible continuo part (that is, the harpsichord part) and replaced it with a viola, an instrument capable of blending with the other strings and providing an entirely lyric—that is, entirely melodic—inner voice.

Such early Italian string quartets placed an overwhelming emphasis on the first violin part. In these early quartets, the second violin, viola, and ‘cello parts are essentially accompanimental, without much character of their own. Let’s listen to the opening of such a movement by Baldassare Galuppi, composed ca. 1740.



Galuppi, Baldassare (1706-1785), Concerto A Quattro in G Minor, movement 3 (ca. 1740); Quartetto Italiano, Testament

While early string quartets like Galuppi’s are of historical interest, they do not display the independent voices and interactive, conversational element that today we consider as the essence of a true string quartet. Such “true” string quartets developed during the 1750s and 1760s in southern Germany and Austria, where the new, lyric, pre-Classical Italian style merged with the German predilection for independent part writing.

The Bohemian-born, Austrian-trained Franz Xaver Richter was the composer before Haydn who did the most to forge the “true” four-voice string quartet. Richter’s string quartets published as Op. 5, which were written around 1757 and published in 1768, were his most influential quartets. Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf—a friend of both Haydn and Mozart—wrote of playing the Richter Op. 5 string quartets during the late 1760s:

“We were *glued* to the six new Richter Quartets, which Schweitzer received. He played the ‘cello, I the first violin, my older brother the second violin, and my younger one the viola. Midway through them we drank an expensive coffee [Peet’s Mocha Sunani? Just wondering.] We enjoyed ourselves thoroughly.”

Let’s hear a bit of the last movement of Richter’s String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 5, No. 2 of ca. 1757.



Franz Xaver Richter, String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 5, No. 2, Fugato Presto (1757)

Haydn's String Quartets

In his 68 string quartets, written across the span of his career, Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) established what we now consider to be a "string quartet": a multi-movement composition for four genuinely individual string parts that together create a whole a gazillion times greater than the sum of their parts.

Haydn's string quartet writing reached its first great level of maturity in six quartets he composed in 1781 and had published as his Op. 33 in 1782.

According to Haydn himself, the Op. 33 quartets were written:

"In an entirely new and particular manner."

In this, Haydn was referring to two things. First, these Op. 33 string quartets (and all of his many string quartets that followed) exhibit a theretofore unheard of degree of voice (or "part") independence. Second, Haydn is referring to his evolving method of "thematic development", by which his themes are fragmented and dissected and reassembled in new and often startling ways. Haydn's particular brand of "thematic development" imbued his music with a tremendous sense of unity and would powerfully influence the music of Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert and by extension, just about every composer that came after.

Let's hear the opening of the fourth movement of Haydn's String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3, the so-called "Bird" quartet. (The nickname is not a reference to a certain hand gesture but rather a reference to the "avian" quality of the first movement's opening theme.)

Back to the opening of the fourth movement of the Bird. Note, please, the Russian folk-song flavor of this finale; it's a musical tip-of-the-hat to Grand Duke Paul of Russia, to whom the quartets were dedicated. Most importantly, let's be aware of the wonderful handling of the resources of the quartet: the sense of conversational interplay between the instruments.



Haydn String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 "The Bird", Movement 4 (1781)

These Op. 33 string quartets of Haydn's had a singularly profound influence on Wolfgang Mozart (1756-1791). And Mozart's quartets, would, in turn, have a singularly profound influence on those of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). And Beethoven's quartets would have a singularly profound influence on those of Franz Schubert (1797-1828). And there it is: the big four of the so-called First Viennese School—Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert—are also the big four of the string quartet. Together, they made the string quartet the pre-eminent chamber music combination it remains to this day, and together they set a standard of compositional quality and expressive content that remain our standard today. Not bad for four dead, male, native-German speakers, or in the jargon of contemporary PC, four metabolically challenged, estrogen deficient, paragons of imperialistic Euro-phallocentricity.

Thank you.