

## **Robert Schumann (1810-1856), String Quartet in A minor, Opus 41 No. 1 (1842)**

Robert Schumann devoted his energies in the year 1842 to composing chamber music, preparing himself, as was his habit, by studying the music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, while also apparently developing a growing interest in the contrapuntal techniques of the late Baroque, as exemplified in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The early part of the year he had spent on tour with his wife Clara, one of the leading pianists of the time, but returned to Leipzig alone while the tour continued, feeling overshadowed by Clara's ongoing successes. At first moodily unable to compose, he began studying his predecessors' quartets in April, then wrote all three of his string quartets in a burst of creative output between June 4 and July 22, dedicating them to his friend Felix Mendelssohn.

Schumann worked on all three quartets at the same time. The Quartet in A minor, Opus 41 No. 1, was the first to be completed, and is, as well, the least conventional of the three. After the initial introductory section in A minor, one is immediately struck that the first movement scans as a large scale sonata form in the key of F major, a major 3rd below the pitch A that Schumann conceived as the tonal center of the entire quartet. Actually, Schumann's idea is to surround the tonic key of A minor (and finally A major) with keys situated "symmetrically" a minor 3rd above (C major) and a major 3rd below (F major). Though a somewhat unusual plan for a multi-movement work, it nevertheless bears the imprint of a similar interest in 3<sup>rd</sup> relationships found in works such as Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata (1804) and Schubert's Great C Major Symphony (1825), as well as the works of Schumann's friend and contemporary Johannes Brahms. In fact, the key relationships in this first of his quartets extend to Schumann's conception of the three Opus 41 quartets as a group, the first in A minor, the second in F major, the third in A major.

The imitative entries in the first movement's introduction suggest the influence of Bach's music, as do several other features of the work. The movement's uplifting F major theme unfolds expansively, culminating in a short fugato that begins with the viola by itself, again a nod to Bach. The C major second theme that follows is both more exuberant and more chromatic as it proceeds through several harmonic areas in sequential repetitions. Closing material gravitates back to the character of the F major theme. The development, which elaborates both themes extensively, contains one surprise, a *ritardando* that feels as though a reprise is imminent, but leads instead to further exploration of the second theme, delaying the reprise by another 25 bars. The recapitulation is as expected.

The second movement is a vivacious Scherzo of considerable scope. Formally, the scherzo, like the minuet-and-trio form it replaced, typically includes two paired ideas, presented as AABA, 'A' representing the scherzo (or older minuet) and 'B' its paired trio. Here Schumann cleverly nests the idea: the Scherzo itself, in the key of A minor, includes its own, internal trio, in C major, producing its own internal aaba form. The tenderly poignant Intermezzo in C major that follows then serves as a trio to the whole of the scherzo, which as expected returns to conclude the entirety of the second movement in the tonic key of A minor.

The brief three-measure phrase that introduces the adagio third movement proves to be a frame that returns as both conclusion and reminiscence at the end. The Adagio's lovely cantabile theme in F major is sung in turn by the first violin, then the cello. A ranging accompanimental figure in the viola just before the cello's statement becomes the subject of extensive development in the movement's increasingly agitated middle section, which begins in the key of A flat major, inflected to A flat minor just before the return of the F major theme (once again in the first violin). For a quartet whose overall key is A minor, the Adagio's excursion into areas related to A flat, the leading tone to A (and hardly a closely related key), seems quite surprising, perhaps intended by Schumann to heighten the lovingly expressive affect of this slow movement.

The brilliant finale is a headlong rush through a sonata form centered on the tonic A. The secondary key of C major occupies most by far of the exposition, arriving after only 20 or so of 80 measures, a diminished emphasis on the home key reminiscent of Beethoven's later works, and also of Brahms. The development departs from the key of B minor with an extended fugato evoking, as in the first movement, the contrapuntal practices of Bach and the Baroque. Over its course the development section explores in turn all of the exposition's thematic and motivic material, finally taking a decided turn towards the key of F major, which has been so prominent in the other movements. In a wholly unexpected manner the finale's irrepressible energy comes to a halt as material from the second theme group is magically transformed first into an evocation of bagpipe music, followed close on by a quiet, hymn-like chorale before the presto is reignited in the final drive to the A major ending.

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