

Robert Schumann
String Quartet in A Major, Op. 41, No. 3 (1842)

Robert Schumann wrote all three of his string quartets in a burst of creative output in 1842, dedicating them to his friend Felix Mendelssohn. Such concentrated working periods were not unusual for Schumann. The third of the three quartets, in A major, is perhaps the best known. The first movement, in sonata form, opens with a brief introduction establishing the sighing two-note motive which permeates both of the movement's themes. Marked *teneramente*, or tenderly, the musical expression in this movement is a paradigm of poignance and gracefulness. The development is quite short, the return of the first theme attenuated, leading directly to a full reprise of the *espressivo* second theme.

The second movement is, somewhat unusually, a theme and variations. The movement is marked *agitato*, and most of the variations are energetic, excepting the *poco adagio*, with the first violin and viola in canon (variation 4), which follows on the heels of a cleverly worked out *fugato* (variation 3); and the more settled mood of the final sixth variation. The expansive *adagio* third movement is in richly textured counterpoint reminiscent of Mozart's more complex quartet and quintet writing. The fourth movement *finale*, featuring syncopated, folk-like dance rhythms worked into the principal theme of a sonata rondo formal structure, sweeps along with thrilling momentum, bringing the quartet to a conclusion with an upward rush in the first violin.

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