

Ying Quartet

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String Quartet No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 41, No. 1

1. I. Introduzione: Andante espressivo - Allegro 8:56
2. II. Scherzo: Presto - Intermezzo 3:40
3. III. Adagio 5:46
4. IV. Presto 5:53

String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 41, No. 2

5. I. Allegro vivace 5:12
6. II. Andante quasi Variazioni 8:29
7. III. Scherzo: Presto 3:02
8. IV. Allegro molto vivace 4:49

String Quartet No. 3 in A Major, Op. 41, No. 3

9. I. Andante espressivo - Allegro molto moderato 6:53
10. II. Assai agitato - Un poco adagio - Tempo risoluto 6:02
11. III. Adagio molto 7:55
12. IV. Finale: Allegro molto vivace 7:04

Total Playing Time: 73:41



SCHUMANN: The Three String Quartets

Despite the considerable amount of literature on the life and work of Robert Schumann (1810-1856), universally considered one of the greatest composers of the 19th century, there is surprisingly little discussion of his three string quartets. Schumann's biography is full of fascinating detail: his ambitions as a concert pianist sidetracked by some sort of mysterious injury to his right hand, his difficult struggle to gain recognition and acclaim for his compositions during his lifetime, his success as a writer and publisher of journals on music, his love affair with the young Clara Wieck and his tumultuous relationship with her father, his ambivalence towards Clara's fame and success as a concert pianist, his life-long battle with mental illness that included a suicide attempt and the last two years of his life in an asylum... in fact, if he were alive today, there would be no lack of suitable material for what could be a reality TV series called, "Keeping up with the Schumanns!" At the same time, of course, Schumann's lasting legacy is what many consider to be some of the most beautiful, expressive, tender, haunting, lyrical, and emotionally powerful music ever written.

About his string quartets, however, it seems that most commentators include just one bit of fact and one bit of opinion: Schumann's three string quartets were all written in a few weeks in the summer of 1842, and his writing for strings is, for better or worse, rather pianistic. It is unfortunate that some would dispatch the significance and beauty of these works so easily. Though there are passages and textures in the quartets that are clearly influenced by keyboard technique, this is glorious music. The imagination and wit, vitality and virtuosity, subtlety and nuance, and heartfelt yearning and emotion that are displayed throughout the quartets are enough to be as satisfying as any of Schumann's music. Each one of them is a joy to perform.

Schumann spent the first part of his compositional output until 1840 focusing almost entirely on music for the piano. Evidence of an interest in writing for string quartets begins to appear around 1837. Around that time, Schumann heard Beethoven's Opp. 127 and 131 and exclaimed, "We can find no words to describe their greatness... they seem to mark the furthest limits which man's art and imagination have yet attained." Then in 1838, he wrote to Clara: "The thought of quartets gives me pleasure. The piano is getting too narrow for me. In composing now I often hear a lot of things that I can barely suggest."

It was not until 1842, however, that Schumann finally wrote his three and only string quartets. After composing almost entirely for the piano, 1840 is famously Schumann's "year of the song" in which he produced over 160 lieder, 1841 is his "year of the symphony" in which he wrote two of his four symphonies, and 1842 is his "year of chamber music." In that year, he wrote not only his three string quartets, but also

his piano quartet and piano quintet. The exuberant Piano Quintet, Op. 44, is easily his most well-known piece of chamber music. This was an extraordinary period of creativity for Schumann, and since he finally won his legal battle with Clara's father and married Clara in Sept of 1840, it is tempting to speculate that happy life events proved in this case to be profound artistic inspiration as well.

Schumann began the year of 1842 by ordering scores of quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven from his publisher. After months of devoted study, the actual writing of the quartets went very quickly. In June of 1842 he began to sketch the quartets and completed the third quartet on July 22. Later dedicated to Mendelssohn "in deepest admiration," the quartets received their public premieres in January of 1843.

Since all of the quartets were written in just a few short weeks, it is interesting to take them (Op. 41, Nos. 1, 2 and 3) as a set and consider the similarities and differences between each of the corresponding movements. For example, all three of the first movements are primarily gentle in nature and convey a sense of unfolding, though there are dynamic and energetic moments within. None of them begin with forceful, dramatic intensity to grab an audience; instead, Schumann uses an intimate quality and a sense of drawing the listener in to define the emotional world of these quartets. Two of the three first movements also end in a wonderfully quiet and peaceful way.

Along with the gentleness and intimacy of these first movements, there is also an engaging sense of freshness to all of them, due in part to Schumann's choice of key. After a lengthy introduction in A minor (the overall key of the entire work), the first movement of the First Quartet is actually written in F Major, and the move at the end of the introduction to F major has the effect of opening a window on the most beautiful day. If F major is a key that communicates freshness and bucolic optimism (there are good examples in music of works often in F Major given the nickname "Spring"), the first movement of the second quartet is firmly in F major and takes this idea even further. In fact, some of the introductory material that appears in the First Quartet was originally intended to be the introduction of the Second Quartet, but in the end, Schumann elected to begin the second quartet directly as if to emphasize the immediate and soaring qualities of this music.

The first movement of the Third Quartet is arguably the most intimate and emotionally warm of the three. It is based on a falling fifth motive presented in the first two notes of the introduction by the first violin, and many listeners and performers have long connected this sighing motive with the name, "Clara." Whether this is actually true or not, liberal use of this motive throughout the movement lends a heady, rhapsodic outpouring of emotions to the music. In this movement, it is easy to sense the creative outpouring in the years following his marriage to Clara, probably signaling the happiest period of his life.

Based on the quartet form established by Haydn and Mozart, all three of the Schumann Quartets feature two middle movements, one of them quick and lively and one of them slow and songful. The second movement of the First Quartet is a scherzo, full of a repetitive, driving rhythmic texture that evokes the abandon of

galloping horses. The full-on sprint of this movement is interrupted by a calmer, more flowing trio section, though the length of the trio and the brisk metronome marking keep the scherzo from resting too long. The third movement of the First Quartet is the slow movement, and in every way it resembles a song without words, with one voice of the quartet singing the melody, and the rest of the ensemble gently accompanying as if a keyboard texture is spread between the other three instruments.

The middle movements of the Second Quartet appear in the opposite order with the slow movement preceding the scherzo. The slow movement of this quartet is a substantial and exquisite theme and set of variations. Many commentators have compared this movement to the large scale and profoundly beautiful theme and variations that serve as the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 127 quartet. Some of the similarities include a key signature of Ab major, a 12/8 time signature, and certain types of rhythmic gestures and quartet textures. The melodic and harmonic contents are quite different, and Schumann's theme and variations here is rather straightforward in concept with steadily increasing rhythmic values through each variation that recalls Classical technique. Schumann also chooses not to modulate (as Beethoven does significantly in Op. 127) and stays firmly in Ab major with each variation and the coda.

The scherzo of the Second Quartet is a devilish little movement in C minor characterized by quicksilver arpeggiated figures that fly up and down the fingerboards, pass seamlessly between voices, and are offset from the main pulse by one eighth note. The evasive rhythmic effect of the scherzo is righted for a moment in the brief trio section in the parallel major that sounds contrastingly carefree and tossed off before heading back to the main material.

For his Third Quartet, Schumann places the middle movements back in the order of scherzo then slow movement. His scherzo here is not labeled a scherzo, though, and where the other scherzo movements emphasized speedy and virtuosic instrumental sparkle in typical ABA form, this movement is a theme and variations that begins elusively. In fact, the opening of the movement consists of small melodic fragments that start and stop and avoid landing on a strong beat. It is almost as if Schumann begins with a variation and waits to present the actual theme until after three variations have already passed! This theme and variations is based on a rising fourth, which is, of course, closely connected to the first movement as the inverse of the falling fifth motive.

Like the first movement, the third movement of the Third Quartet is in many ways the most heartfelt, the most fervent, the most tender, and the most yearning of all the slow movements in the quartets. The textures alternate between richly harmonized melodic arcs and long passages of suspended harmony marked by gentle and repetitive pulsing in the second violin. Perhaps this is Schumann's heartbeat? In these still, quiet moments, the first violin and viola call gently to one another with the same rising fourth motive from earlier. Perhaps these are the intimate conversations of Robert and Clara captured in this most intimate of musical forms.

The last movements of all three quartets are dazzling displays of instrumental virtuosity as they careen around the full range of the string quartet. They are labeled successively: Presto, Allegro molto vivace, and Allegro molto vivace. The excitement

of the last movement of the First Quartet is fueled by passages of broken thirds that climb up the instruments at top speed. Scales in broken thirds could be an example of a pianistic technique applied to the string quartet, but string players are also asked to learn their scales in broken thirds from the beginning. This is a movement that surely tests a string player's foundation of good early practice habits!

The bravura of the last movement of the Second Quartet is like a jolly romp where the main material is sometimes carried by the first violin alone, sometimes in conversation between pairs of instruments, sometimes in a fast exchange between all four voices. As this final movement nears its end, the speed increases and the Quartet hurtles towards an exhilarating conclusion.

No less virtuosic, the last movement of the Third Quartet is driven by repeated dotted rhythms that scamper merrily along. Could these be related to the quiet heartbeat of dotted rhythms heard in the slow, emotionally rich slow movement that are now wildly and exuberantly so much faster? There are contrasting sections in this movement, including a longer passage marked "Quasi Trio" in which a stately dance sets up for a time only to be swept away by a return to the insistent dotted rhythms. Finally, the dotted rhythm material takes over for good, hurtling this last movement of the Third Quartet toward rousing and climactic final chords.

One additional comment on interpreting these wonderful masterpieces of the string quartet literature has to do with metronome markings. While there is great pleasure in revealing the full range of emotional possibilities of every note of Schumann's scores, it is clear that Schumann fastidiously included metronome markings for every movement and many times additional metronome markings for sections within movements. Like the metronome marks of Beethoven, some of these are surprisingly faster than some might choose in the absence of a metronome mark. Two examples in particular are the last movement of the First Quartet—very nearly the same blazingly fast speed of the finale of Beethoven's Op. 59, No. 3—and the first movement of the Second Quartet—without a metronome mark, one might imagine a much more expansive tempo and generous character.

Performers of Beethoven's music, when faced with metronome markings that seem unconvincingly quick, wonder if Beethoven's metronome was broken, or if he heard music more quickly in his head after becoming deaf, or if performance practice has slowed over the years due to changes in the tension and set up of modern instruments or the increasing size of concert halls. Some performers, however, begin by taking Beethoven at his metronomic "word" and look for the character and vitality that may emerge after wrestling with tempi that at first playing seem uncomfortable. It is in the latter spirit that we have prepared these Schumann Quartets, trusting that Schumann, like Beethoven, believed very much in the use of a metronome as one more essential piece of information to help performers realize the intended character of the music.

It has been richly rewarding to seek the expressive life of each note of these wonderful string quartets of Robert Schumann, and to communicate the powerful way in which these notes come together to reflect every facet of his and our shared humanity.



Ying Quartet

The Ying Quartet occupies a position of unique prominence in the classical music world, combining brilliantly communicative performances with a fearlessly imaginative view of chamber music in today's world. Now in its second decade as a quartet, the Quartet has established itself as an ensemble of the highest musical qualifications in its tours across the United States and abroad. Their performances regularly take place in many of the world's most important concert halls, from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House. At the same time, the Quartet's belief that concert music can also be a meaningful part of everyday life has also drawn the foursome to perform in settings as diverse as the workplace, schools, juvenile prisons, and the White House. In fact, the Ying Quartet's constant quest to explore the creative possibilities of the string quartet has led it to an unusually diverse array of musical projects and interests.

The Ying Quartet's recordings reflect many of the group's wide-ranging musical interests and have generated consistent, enthusiastic acclaim. Their 2007 release of the three Tchaikovsky Quartets and the Souvenir de Florence (with James Dunham and Paul Katz) was nominated for a GRAMMY® Award in the Best Chamber Music Performance category. In addition, their much-heralded collaboration with the Turtle Island Quartet, "Four + 4," explored the common ground between the classic string quartet tradition and jazz and other American vernacular styles, and won a GRAMMY® Award in 2005. Their most recent release with the Billy Childs Chamber Jazz Ensemble, *Autumn in Moving Pictures* was nominated for a GRAMMY® in 2010. In addition, the Ying Quartet's *Dim Sum* features music by Chinese-American composers that merges the Western string quartet with the aural world of traditional Chinese music. The Quartet has also documented its noteworthy LifeMusic commissioning project in its recorded work. *The Ying Quartet play LifeMusic* was named Editor's Choice by Gramophone magazine and is the first in a continuing series. The Ying Quartet is pleased to continue their relationship with Sono Luminus and this release of *SCHUMANN*. Their previous releases on the label were *American Anthem: The Music of Samuel Barber & Howard Hanson* (DSL-92166), and *Anton Arensky: Quartet No. 1, Quartet No. 2, Piano Quintet* (DSL-92143).

In addition to appearing in conventional concert situations, the Ying Quartet is also known for its diverse and unusual performance projects. For several years the Quartet presented a series called "No Boundaries" at Symphony Space in New York City that sought to re-imagine the concert experience. Collaborations with actors, dancers, electronics, a host of non-classical musicians, a magician and even a Chinese noodle chef gave new and thoughtful context to a wide variety of both traditional and contemporary string quartet music. They have also worked with composer Tod Machover and the MIT Media lab in the use of Hyperscore, an innovative musical composition software. Other musical partners range from pianists Menahem Pressler and Gilbert Kalish and cellist Paul Katz to folk musician Mike Seeger, jazz pianist Billy Childs, and the Turtle Island Quartet.

The Ying Quartet's ongoing LifeMusic commissioning project, created in response to their commitment to expanding the rich string quartet repertoire, has already achieved an impressive history. Supported by the Institute for American Music, the Quartet commissions both established and emerging composers to create music that reflects contemporary American life. Augusta Read Thomas, Michael Torke, Chen Yi, Kevin Puts, Paquito D'Rivera, Paul Moravec, Lowell Liebermann, Bernard Rands, Pierre Jalbert, Sebastian Currier, and Carter Pann are only some of the renowned composers and musicians who have written for LifeMusic.

As quartet-in-residence at the Eastman School of Music, the Ying Quartet maintains full time faculty positions in the String and Chamber Music Departments. One cornerstone of chamber music activity at Eastman is the noted Music for All program, in which all students have the opportunity to perform in community settings beyond the concert hall. From 2001-2008, the Ying Quartet has also been the Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University.

The Ying Quartet first came to professional prominence in the early 1990s during their years as resident quartet of Jesup, Iowa, a farm town of 2000 people. Playing before audiences of six to six hundred in homes, schools, churches, and banks, the Quartet had its first opportunities to enable music and creative endeavor to become an integral part of community life. The Quartet considers its time in Jesup the foundation of its present musical life and goals. The residency, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, was widely chronicled in the national media. Toward the end of the residency, the quartet and several of the townspeople were invited to Capitol Hill to testify before Congress on behalf of the NEA.

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