

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Piano Quartet in E flat, Op.47

Schumann Piano Quartet, Op.47, which is composed in 1842, is the sole piano quartet of his illustrious career. In this year, he had accomplished numerous chamber music work, which is known as "Schumann's Year of Chamber Music". Interestingly, though Schumann wrote this quartet for the Russian cellist Mathieu Wielhorsky, the piece is truly dedicated to Clara Schumann, his wife, who has been an unwavering support and inspiration throughout their shared lives.

The quartet starts with a slow introduction where the piano raises an upward questioning phrase and the strings give an answer with four notes. When the Allegro section begins, the strings change their answer to arpeggio chords, and the piano uses them to start the main idea. Near the end, we hear the slow introduction again before the cello plays something new and exciting.

The second movement is the Scherzo, where Schumann tries a new thing by adding in a second trio. The main part uses a quick, quiet pattern; the first trio has a simple, folk-like tune; and the second trio uses off-beat chords mixed with parts of the main part.

In the third movement, the cello plays one of the most charming melodies in this piece, then the theme is taken by the violin and piano. The middle part is in a calm and contemplative mood. The main theme comes back with the viola and violin, and the cello holds the low B-flat note, while other instruments quietly start playing the main theme of the Finale.

The Finale is full of energy and starts with four chords. The viola announces the main melody, and developed in a fugal way. The quartet ends with a burst of energy.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op 19

This Cello Sonata, composed in 1901 right after the popular Second Piano Concerto, mirrors Rachmaninov's mental unsteadiness, who had a tough time with a nervous breakdown because the failure of his First Symphony in 1897. But by the time he wrote this sonata, he had recovered and was feeling creative and excited about music again. Rachmaninov thought the piano was as important as the cello in this piece, sometimes even more. The piano starts most of the music ideas, and then the cello makes them fancier and bigger.

The third movement is one of the most remarkable piece of this sonata. It starts with notes that sound like bells being rung over and over. The mood is dark and serious, with long parts of the music growing more and more intense until they reach a big, emotional high point. After that, it calms down and ends in a warm and peaceful way.

Dimitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Piano Trio No.2 in E Minor, Op.67

After finishing his Eighth Symphony during the World War II, Shostakovich started working on this piano trio in late 1943 and finished it in August the following year. He wrote this piece for his good friend Ivan Sollertinsky and it was first played on 14 November 1944. While there was no published program for this trio, many thought he was criticizing the strict rules in the Soviet Union. The performance of this trio was banned from 1948 until after Stalin died in 1953.

The third movement uses a special baroque dance form: passacaglia. The piano plays slow, serious chords, and the violin and cello add different tunes on top, sometimes together or one after the other. The last movement sounds like Jewish dance. People think it was made after hearing sad stories from places where bad things happened during the war, like Majdanek in Poland. The violin, piano, and cello each start their own tunes, which sound like dances from eastern Europe but are actually about sadness and ending. Near the finish, fragments of the first part and the dance style can be heard again. The music ends feeling like giving up.