

14 The string quartet in the twentieth century

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Although the string quartet did not regain the privileged position it enjoyed during the Classical period, many twentieth-century composers from many different cultural backgrounds and stylistic positions looked to the genre as a context suitable for their most intimate thoughts. Throughout the century the string quartet was often viewed not only as a medium conducive to experimentation and formal innovation, but also for its positive re-engagement with tradition; this double focus was symptomatic of the multifarious nature of modernism, an ‘ism’ which encapsulated the defining aesthetic trends of the early decades of the century. This sense of experimentation and innovation often led to an expansion of playing techniques, an increase in the expressive parameters of the music and departures from the standard four-movement pattern of the Classical quartet. However, despite its use as a vehicle for change, the string quartet continued to provide a generic framework which reflected the inherited traditions and conventions as accumulated through the history and stylistic developments of the genre, even if in some cases it was only to construct a point for new departure. This relationship between tradition and innovation, a relationship which was at times oppositional, at others interactive, will come to be seen as a defining reference point for a generalised understanding of the string quartet repertory of the twentieth century. It will become pertinent through regional/national surveys of some of the main composers and works in the medium. Such surveys are not necessarily intended always to suggest national style groupings; rather they are used merely as a convenient and accessible format through which the principal works can be presented.¹

Austria/Germany

The struggle to come to terms with the accumulated weight of the inherited traditions and conventions of the string quartet genre is rendered most explicit in the Austro-Germanic context, which can be seen as partly formed through this encounter with the past. The figure of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) assumes a central position within this particular historical narrative, both as a composer of string quartets and as a focal personality in

[288]

the often turbulent and challenging nature of the modernist culture of the period.

Schoenberg's engagement with the string quartet provides a logical continuity with the inherited legacy of the Austro-Germanic tradition as mediated through Brahms. Although often regarded as a conservative counter-balance to the progressive identity of Wagner, Brahms was claimed by Schoenberg, in a seminal essay titled 'Brahms the Progressive', as a prototype for his own stylistic innovations.² It is also significant that in this essay Schoenberg takes the string quartet writing of Brahms as one of his models. The harmonic context of a significant extract from the first movement of Brahms' C minor quartet Op. 51 No. 1 (bb 11–23) 'competes successfully with that of many a Wagnerian passage'.³ Schoenberg's first practical translation of this Brahmsian legacy is the String Quartet in D major. Composed in 1897, but not published until 1966 and not seen as forming part of Schoenberg's acknowledged output, this is clearly an apprentice work. However, it also demonstrates a high degree of confidence and technical fluidity. Like the string quartets of Brahms, it exhibits the classic four-movement pattern of the traditional quartet. The conventional nature of this formal outline provides a parallel to the key scheme of the work: D major, F# minor, Bb minor and D minor. This key scheme, while emphasising the traditional aspects of tonality, also includes the possibilities of expansion of tonality, an approach which Schoenberg will increasingly exploit. According to Arnold Whittall, the third-based key relationships suggest 'a manner reminiscent of the later Beethoven (for example, the "Hammerklavier" Sonata)',⁴ a suggestion which emphasises Schoenberg's initial debt to his predecessors.

During this early formative stage of his career Schoenberg benefited from the general artistic climate of Vienna and the support of several other young composers. The most notable was his close friend Alexander von Zemlinsky (1871–1942), a composer who also explored the possibilities of the string quartet, often in ways which could be seen to provide a certain parallel to Schoenberg's stylistic development. Schoenberg's first acknowledged string quartet is his Op. 7 in D minor. In contrast to the conventional four-movement pattern of the earlier unpublished quartet, this work continues Schoenberg's emergent experimentation with form and the linking of ideas and movements to provide a single movement of concentrated thematic material and development. And yet, like its Romantic predecessors (Liszt's B minor sonata), it conveys an evident sense of division and change, with the presentation of thematic material corresponding to a formal design of initial allegro movement, scherzo, slow movement and a rondo finale. Although in no sense monothematic, the work shows a strong sense of thematic development throughout, a process which Schoenberg came to understand as 'developing variation', and one which, in the immediate

context of this quartet, he saw as being derived from his understanding of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony. However, although the work is defined through this thematic dimension in association with the compressed formal model, the harmonic language of this quartet is still largely that of the late nineteenth century.

Schoenberg's Quartet No. 2, Op. 10 (1907–8), reverts to the standard four-movement model, yet it is clearly a radical advance on his previous quartet in that it provides a marked departure from the tonal stability of his earlier works to something which at crucial moments evidences greater fluidity and less certainty in terms of its tonal identity. The first movement utilises a sonata-form design based upon the F♯ minor tonality. However, although this tonality is clearly in operation, there is little sense of functional harmonic progression. The most notable aspect of this work is its introduction of the human voice (soprano) in the third and fourth movements, perhaps reflecting Schoenberg's awareness of Mahler's use of the voice within the symphonic context. The third movement, which contains a setting of Stefan George's intensely expressive poem 'Litanei' (prayer), takes the form of variations, producing a texture that is saturated by thematic material derived from the first two movements. The natural restraint of the variation process also provides a controlled contrast to the intensity of the text and its vocal realisation. The final movement, which like the first corresponds to sonata form, again sets the poetry of Stefan George. This movement is often referred to as forming part of Schoenberg's departure from tonality to atonality. While this is certainly a seminal moment for Schoenberg and there is a real sense of difference to the music, it would be wrong automatically to define it through any simplistic struggle or separation between tonality and atonality. Rather it is better to hear the music as a gradual drift into a condition of difference or 'otherness' ('I feel the air of another planet') through a heightened sense of ambiguity, an ambiguity which is constructed through an ever-increasing expansion of the possibilities of tonality towards an indefinable point where tonality no longer seems to be meaningful.

Anton Webern (1883–1945) and Alban Berg (1885–1935), Schoenberg's two best-known students, continued to explore the possibilities of the string quartet but essentially achieved quite different results. Webern's writing for the medium marks a shift of emphasis from the quartet as a genre to the quartet as a texture/instrumental ensemble. In other words, he does not explore the formal conventions and expectations of the genre but does remain interested in the actual sound produced by the ensemble. Webern's first exploration of this texture is the early string quartet of 1905 (without opus number and not performed until 1962), a work which he seems to have consciously modelled on Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (1899), but which also

demonstrates an awareness of his mentor's Op. 7 quartet. The resemblance to these works is based upon Webern's attempt to blend contrasted sections and textures into a single-movement form. The drive towards unity and coherence in this early work seems in sharp contrast to Webern's *Five Movements for String Quartet* Op. 5 (1909), which inhabits the familiar Webernesque sound-world of short gestures and fragmentary textures. But, as always with Webern, there is an underlying coherence. This apparent paradox between fragmentation and coherence is explored at a higher level in the *Six Bagatelles for String Quartet* Op. 9 (1911–13). Alban Berg's First String Quartet Op. 3 (1909–10) is a two-movement work which seems more indebted to the sound world of late Romanticism than the contemporary works of Webern. The last work of Berg to be completed under Schoenberg's tutelage, it marks his emergence as a distinctive and original composer, demonstrating his fascination with and mastery of complex motivic and thematic detail while maintaining an intense and directly expressionistic mode of communication.

Schoenberg's development of serialism in the early 1920s also coincided with a rediscovery of Classical forms, the radical ordering of the pitch material being seen to require a traditional order and context within the formal dimension. This is reflected in both Schoenberg's Third (Op. 30, 1927) and his Fourth (Op. 37, 1936) string quartets, both of which revert to the Classical four-movement pattern most typical of the genre. In contrast to this return to the archetypal features of the quartet, both Berg and Webern in their quartet writing after their adoption of serialism continued to explore diffuse textures and differentiated contexts. For example, Berg's second and final work in the medium, his *Lyric Suite* (1926), consists of six movements which juxtapose fast and slow tempi. It also features a juxtaposition of serial and non-serial pitch materials. However, this juxtaposition assumes the appearance of an integrated musical language, one which continues to reflect the expressive and dramatic nature of Berg's music in general. Webern's String Quartet Op. 28 (1936–8) is also representative of his own manifestation of serialism; its use of palindromes and canonic and variation textures is typical of Webern's music of this period. The first of its three movements makes this clear through the use of a theme and six variations which also have a larger sense of form. However, although this is clearly a rigorous and at times formidable musical language, it is also an engaging one, which generates its own unique sense of musical drama and tension.

The development of Schoenbergian serialism coincided with the rise of neo-classicism, which, in the German context, was most readily identifiable with the music of Paul Hindemith (1895–1963). Although serialism and neo-classicism were commonly perceived as opposites, there is a certain sense of convergence between the two in that both reflected, although in

very different ways, a ‘return to order’ after the seemingly anarchic period prior to the First World War. Hindemith’s string quartet writing generally follows his main compositional concerns and reflects the prevailing orthodoxies of his neo-classicism: traditional formal models, contrapuntal textures, and repeated rhythmic patterns. It is also notable that Hindemith’s quartet writing generally makes fewer demands on playing techniques than the contemporary works of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, and its accommodation within standard technical limitations as well as formal conventions is a further reflection of the reconstructed notion of tradition evident within this particular stylistic category. The claimed accessibility of aspects of Hindemith’s neo-classicism emphasises the functional aspects of this music (*Gebrauchsmusik*) and in some instances took the form of a concern for amateur music making, a concern which was in keeping with the original, private conception of chamber music to which the string quartet once belonged.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, an emerging generation of composers mainly associated with the Darmstadt summer school avoided traditional genres as part of their compositional aesthetic, although their fascination with the music of Webern provided a certain point of continuity with the more immediate past. However, during the post-war period several significant composers continued to explore the possibilities of the historicised genres of music, including the string quartet. One of the most notable is Hans Werner Henze (b. 1926). Following an early essay in neo-classicism (1947), Henze’s *Second Quartet* (1952) absorbs the prevailing influences of the period. He remarked: ‘Four or five years [after the first quartet] I made a new attempt in this difficult genre. Meanwhile the encounter (in Darmstadt) with René Leibowitz had taken place, and the music of the Second Viennese School had begun to exercise its overpowering influence on us, the younger generation. There was practically no-one who didn’t consider it a matter of great urgency to get to grips with its potential inheritance. My *Second String Quartet* should be seen as an eloquent witness to this tendency.’⁵ While this influence is less marked in the later works, it is clearly an active presence in this, Henze’s first mature quartet. However, although this work can be considered a success, Henze did not return to the genre until the mid 1970s, at which point he produced a remarkable trilogy of quartets (1975–6). The final work of this trilogy, the *Fifth String Quartet*, is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Britten, and the six movements of this work reflect the symbiotic relationship between drama and lyricism which is definitive of Henze’s music of this period. The composer claims that this work seems to ‘remember the historical concept of the string quartet as a place of inward intensification, of maximum concentration, of contemplation.’⁶ This is a good description of this specific work, but it is equally an effective reminder

of the unique and often personal nature of the string quartet as a historical genre.

Henze's positive re-engagement with the tradition of the quartet has been continued by Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952). Rihm was part of a generation of German composers who rejected the perceived austerity of the Darmstadt avant garde, and his mature music reflects a concern with communication and comprehension. However, as with Henze, this does not result in a necessarily simplified or compromised musical language. In his Fourth String Quartet (1981), Rihm produces a work which is overflowing with expressive gestures, a quality which brings to mind the music of Berg, within a texture which is often fragmentary and resistant to formal categorisation, thus highlighting the individuality and intensity of the music. Through this expressive framework Rihm produces a glance backwards towards the expressionism of the early works of Schoenberg but in a fundamentally contemporary way. He thus situates himself within the compositional mainstream of twentieth-century German music, a mainstream which has returned in many different ways and contexts to the string quartet as both a genre and a texture.

Italy

Clearly the traditional genres of music, with the obvious exception of opera, were not as embedded in the history of Italian music as in that of Austro-Germany. However, certain Italian composers of the twentieth century have produced string quartets of note. For example, Alfredo Casella (1883–1947) marked the onset of his neo-classicism in the early 1920s with two string quartets (1920 and 1923–4), and Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882–1973) produced eight published quartets, the first in 1920 and the last in 1964.

The generation of composers which emerged after the Second World War was in the main more interested in an avant-garde experimentalism (often involving the voice) rather than exploring the continuing potential of a now historicised genre such as the string quartet. For example, the leading Italian composer of this period, Luciano Berio (1925–2003), has made only occasional forays into string quartet writing (*Study for string quartet*, 1952; *String Quartet*, 1955–6; *Sincronie for String Quartet*, 1963–4; *Notturmo*, 1993). However, there are some notable contributions, perhaps the most dramatic being that of Luigi Nono (1924–91). His *Fragmente – Stille, an Diotima* (Fragments – Silence to Diotima) (1979–80) has an extra-musical dimension, based around the poetry of Hölderlin (a love poem to Diotima).⁷ The work consists of a number of fragments, often bordering on silence. Its careful dynamic gradations put great demands on both the player and listener, yet this suppression of sound becomes in itself a musical gesture,

one which is hauntingly dramatic, the sense of dramatic tension providing a reflection of both Nono's own musical language and the wider landscape of contemporary Italian music.

Great Britain

The resurgence of musical life often referred to as the 'English Musical Renaissance' featured a new found interest in generic composition, with the progenitors of this 'renaissance', Hubert Parry (1848–1918) and Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), demonstrating a certain interest in the string quartet. This interest reflected the influence of the sublimated Romanticism of Brahms, an influence which also became evident in the string quartet writing of Edward Elgar (1857–1934).

Although many English composers of the early decades of the century produced string quartets – Smyth, Moeran, Bax, Delius, Vaughan Williams – it was Frank Bridge (1879–1941) who produced the most sustained contribution to the genre in the first half of the century. Bridge was himself a professional violinist and he had an intimate familiarity with the general context of chamber music, which is reflected in his own wide-ranging output for chamber ensemble. The first of Bridge's four numbered quartets was premiered in 1906 and, following its initial success in a competition in Bologna, takes the name of that city as its informal title.⁸ The work is in four movements and is in the key of E minor. Its musical language is largely that of Romanticism as contained within essentially Classical formal models. This is evident in the first movement, which echoes the string quartet writing of Brahms through the deployment of a traditional sonata form design in conjunction with lyrical thematic material. This echo is most evident in the extended second subject, which, though expansive and lyrical, perhaps lacks formal direction. His *Second String Quartet* (1915) defines itself as the first major chamber music of his compositional maturity and has been described as marking 'a new level of technical accomplishment in British quartet writing . . . not to be surpassed till Bridge returned to the medium 11 years later'.⁹ In this work, Bridge's musical language becomes more chromatic and, consequently, experiences an increase in its intensity, yet the effect is still largely traditional. For all their formal and thematic intricacy, each of the work's three movements is accommodated within an accessible and recognisable framework. However, Bridge's *Third* (1926) and *Fourth* (1937) Quartets move towards a more radical sound-world, one in which this unique composer found his true voice, articulating his English musical background in conjunction with his modernist aspirations.

Bridge also assumes a position of importance as the teacher of Benjamin Britten (1913–76). Although Britten achieved most in the context of opera and vocal works, his Second and Third String Quartets represent major achievements in their own right, as well as providing valuable signposts to his wider compositional concerns. Britten's first work in the genre, the early quartet in D major, was composed rapidly in 1931. It is still clearly a student work, but it is one which indicates the veracity of his precocious development. Nevertheless, the attempted connection and unification of ideas and materials do not seem to sit easily in relation to Britten's general musical instincts. Britten did not return to the string quartet until 1941 (String Quartet No. 1). The Second Quartet (1945) was to be his last instrumental sonata-related work for some time. It represents an ambitious and imaginative response to the demands of quartet writing. Its outline consists of two outer slow movements with a shorter, fast movement as its centre. This central movement seems much like an interruption to the large-scale, slow-moving textures of the outer movements. The first movement, defined by its initial thematic material and its C major tonality, suffers from structural and formal flaws. According to Arnold Whittall, the extended exposition in conjunction with a highly compressed recapitulation 'produces a movement of peculiar proportions and uncertain direction', and he goes on to conclude that 'The first movement of the second quartet attempts three things at once; to be more economical in material, more expansive in design, and more explicitly unified in spirit.'¹⁰

In contrast to the formal complexity of the first movement, the second is relatively straightforward, comprising a concise ternary structure, which encapsulates the increased sense of movement and mobility. The third movement carries the title of Chacony, which conveys Britten's ongoing fascination with the music of Purcell (the work was first performed on the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death). It begins with a Purcellian ground bass theme which is repeated as a sequence of variations. These variations are presented in groups which are linked by solo cadenzas. The different formal identities of each of the three movements could seem to suggest that this is a diffuse, eclectic work. However, while it is clearly an individual work which is specific to this stage of Britten's career, it is also a quartet of great power and effect.

In contrast to Britten's general avoidance of historical genres (such as the symphony and string quartet), his contemporary Michael Tippett (1905–98) saw the presence of these genres as something which demanded a positive and sympathetic response. Tippett's First String Quartet can be described as 'the fruit of a very long apprenticeship'¹¹ and was certainly not Tippett's first attempt in the genre. However, it is a work which marks Tippett's early maturity as a composer. Originally composed in 1935, the first version

consisted of four movements, but in 1943 the composer significantly revised the work and replaced the first two movements with a new single movement. The third and final movement is nevertheless the most remarkable. It is a rapidly moving fugue which reflects both Tippett's general feel for contrapuntal textures and, more specifically, his understanding of Beethoven's late style.

Tippett's Second Quartet was composed between 1941 and 1942 and therefore predates the 1943 revision of the first quartet. It may be that it was the process of working on the Second Quartet that led to his dissatisfaction with the first. This quartet seems traditional, comprising four movements and with a stated key signature (F♯ minor). As in the First Quartet, use is made of a fugal texture. Now it is the second movement (Andante) which is presented in this way.¹² This interest in fugue forms part of the prevailing neo-classicism of the period, an aesthetic which was directly fashioned on the reinterpretation of the past. However, rather than producing something which is merely typical of its time, Tippett now presents something which is distinctly his own. His Third String Quartet, composed between 1945 and 1946, confirms the sound-world of the first two quartets while also engendering its own unique sense of identity. In contrast to the four-movement pattern of the Second Quartet, this work is symmetrical in form, consisting of five movements: three fast fugues (movements 1, 3 and 5) and two slow movements (2 and 4). While this seems to be a highly individual outline, Arnold Whittall suggests that it 'perhaps reflect[s] Tippett's awareness of the fourth and fifth quartets of Bartók'.¹³ As well as this suggestion of Bartók, the continuing focus on fugal textures again draws attention to the importance of Beethoven's use of fugue in his late works as a historical model for Tippett.

Following these early explorations of the string quartet, Tippett did not return to the genre until the later 1970s with a Fourth String Quartet (1977–8) which, given his wide-ranging stylistic development since the earlier quartets, is very different. However, although his sound-world has changed dramatically, there is a certain continuity in terms of Tippett's response to the Beethovenian legacy. Tippett here builds a single overall structure out of four linked movements (slow, fast, moderately slow, very slow), an approach which has precedents in the late quartets of Beethoven (Opp. 130, 131 and 132) and is also echoed in other major works of this period of Tippett's career (notably the Fourth Symphony (1976–7) and the Triple Concerto for violin, viola, cello and orchestra (1978–9)). This Beethovenian reference is confirmed through Tippett's deliberate adoption of the theme from Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, although fugue, in contrast to the earlier quartets, is notably absent. Tippett's fifth and last quartet (1990) comes from the remarkable final stages of his compositional career. While it would

be only too convenient to interpret this work as a culmination or summation of Tippett's quartet writing, there is a sense of revisiting past concerns. For example, the play with the drama of a sonata-style form in the first of two movements, and the moments of expansive lyricism, have always been reinvented as consistent features of Tippett's musical language. However, these concerns are effectively contained within what is by definition Tippett's late style.

Tippett's five quartets give a remarkable insight into the development of his compositional maturity and play a significant part in the concluding part of his career. While it is perhaps cause for regret that he did not turn his attention towards the quartet in the middle stages of his career, the focus on the historical archetype of the genre and the restatement of Tippett's engagement with the Beethovenian legacy situate the five quartets in the centre of his *œuvre*, making him a figure who seems to personify the dialectic between innovation and tradition which defines so much of twentieth-century music.

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–94), a contemporary of Tippett, produced her most distinctive work in the string quartet medium. Her thirteen quartets, composed between 1933 and 1983, constitute one of the most sustained and significant bodies of string quartets by a British composer. Maconchy explains the perpetual challenge of writing string quartets as 'The pursuit of the argument, its shaping into a satisfying musical form, the cut and thrust of the counterpoint – these all stimulate and stretch the intellect . . .'¹⁴ Her initial response to this challenge was the First String Quartet, composed between 1932 and 1933. This is a four-movement work, with each movement presenting its own character. The first movement (*Allegro feroce*) is defined by its rhythmic energy, with the repetition of a syncopated figure being the defining element of the movement. The subsequent movements (*Scherzo*, *Andante sostenuto* and *Presto*) relate quite directly to the inherited models of the string quartet. The first departure from this pattern comes in the Third Quartet of 1938. This work takes the form of a single movement with distinctive sections. The composer describes it as being 'in a cyclic form, one continuously unfolding movement';¹⁵ the opening *Lento* section articulates an initial sequence of ideas which are subsequently developed. Maconchy's musical language in her quartets is an increasingly modern one, but one which is enclosed within a positive response to the traditions and expectations of the genre.

This positive re-engagement with tradition in the form of a historicised genre is vividly present in the music of Robert Simpson (1921–97). His eleven symphonies and sixteen string quartets (the first composed in 1952 and the last in 1996) effectively define his career, with the symphonic concern with unity of form and content conditioning his response to the string

quartet. His music is permeated with compositional precedents (notably Haydn, Beethoven, Sibelius and Nielsen) which are defined through this preoccupation with musical unity. In terms of his string quartets, the influence of Beethoven is most notable. For example, his Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Quartets are a compositional response to Beethoven's Razumovsky quartets. His use of preformed material is most evident in the Ninth Quartet (1982), Variations and a Fugue on a Theme of Haydn (based on a theme from Haydn's symphony No. 47 in G). This is a massive display of compositional virtuosity in the spirit of Bach's Goldberg Variations and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations. However, this emphasis on compositional precedents should not be seen to undermine Simpson's own musical identity or originality, which lies in his effective treatment of these precedents, shaping them into his own unique musical identity.

The string quartet writing of Brian Ferneyhough (b. 1943) has been in sharp contrast to composers such as Britten, Tippett and Simpson. Ferneyhough adopted as his starting point the post-war avant garde of Boulez and Stockhausen, producing a sound-world which has often been described as 'complex'. His *Sonatas for String Quartet* from 1967 is one of his first major works and one which immediately provides an outline of his compositional concerns. As is evident from the title, this work is not concerned with the string quartet as a genre. Ferneyhough claimed Purcell's Fantasias for viols as a starting point, but the general fragmentary nature of the textures and the highly sectionalised format of the score bring to mind Webern. The work consists of twenty short movements with silence forming an important part of the texture. The fragmentary nature of its material places certain demands on both listener and player, but there is an underlying sense of continuity and expansion which gives a greater feeling of purpose to the seemingly fragmentary moments. Ferneyhough's Second (1979–80) and Third String Quartets (1987) belong to a stage of his career by which he had already established the central aspects of a consistent style and musical language. The Second Quartet constitutes one relatively brief movement which is conditioned by a dense interactive sense of polyphony; this again can appear fragmentary, but there is an underlying notion of structural coherence which gives direction to the music. The quartet writing of Ferneyhough seems far removed from the traditional expectations of the genre. It places great demands on the players (particularly in terms of its rhythmic and temporal complexity) and may appear as forbiddingly complex to some listeners. However, there is a dramatic tension which manifests itself in sharp contrasts and fleeting textures, and it is Ferneyhough's great compositional achievement that he is able to give a real sense of structural logic and musical direction to these textures.

The wide differences of approach to the string quartet by composers such as Britten, Tippett, Maconchy, Simpson and Ferneyhough will no doubt

intriguing in our age of increasing stylistic and cultural pluralism and it is intriguing to wonder how our perception of the genre will be challenged by Peter Maxwell Davies' declared intention to turn his attention to the sustained production of string quartets over the next few years.

Russia/Soviet Union

One of the most notable Russian contributions to the quartet during the early part of the century is the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* of Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971). Composed in 1914, these pieces are a radical exploration of the string quartet texture and occupy a significant point in Stravinsky's career. Coming after *The Rite of Spring* (1913), the work through which Stravinsky most clearly articulated his own vision of modernism, they condense some of the essential features of that large-scale orchestral ballet into the quartet medium. The first piece consists of a short melodic phrase in the first violin part which is based on only four notes (G, A, B, C) and conveys a sense of folk-like simplicity through its repetitive nature. This melodic cell is supported by the sustained D and C♯ in the viola while the second violin has a four-note cell (F♯, E, D♯, C♯). This material acts as an intrusion into the repetitions of the four-note cell of the first violin and thus helps generate the sense of tension evident within the piece. The bass of the texture is provided by a three-note cell in the cello (C, D♭, E♭) which is repeated continually throughout the piece. The effect of these different coexisting cells is very much that of collision (or collage) with very little obvious sense of convergence between them. This almost Cubist effect seems to extrapolate the cell idea from *The Rite of Spring* and explore its possibilities on a condensed yet more consistent and systematic level. The second of the three pieces again explores possibilities of juxtaposition, but now those of textures and ideas rather than the coexistent cells of the first piece. The final piece again explores the repetition of a basic idea (C, D, E♭), but in a much more subdued and contemplative way than the first. Stravinsky was to return to the string quartet only in passing (*Concertino* for string quartet (1920), *Double Canon* for string quartet (1959)) and, while his relationship to his homeland was to become increasingly detached, the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* serve as a valuable reminder that he was a quintessentially Russian composer who constructed his own sense of modernism, quite distinct from that of the Austro-Germanic strand, as represented by Schoenberg.

The changing political and economic landscape which helped drive Stravinsky from Russia had the same effect on Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953), who, for a period until his return to the Soviet Union in 1936, moved to the USA. Prokofiev's First String Quartet Op. 50 was composed in 1930,

during his period of exile. He claimed that this work had emerged as a consequence of his study of Beethoven's string quartets. However, the three movements of this work reflect Prokofiev's general neo-classicism of the period rather than any direct Beethovenian influence. His Second Quartet, composed after his return and during the Second World War (Op. 92, 1941), reflects the folk music of the Northern Caucasus, to which Prokofiev was evacuated during the war, a factor which gives the work a unique identity and provides a certain contrast to the First Quartet.

Of the many significant composers who chose to stay and work within the Soviet system one of the most intriguing is Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881–1950). Although most prolific as a composer of symphonies, he produced a total of thirteen string quartets throughout his career. This was a time of political oppression, during which the regime placed certain demands on composers, along with other artists and writers. Myaskovsky seemed outwardly reconciled to the political nature of his role as a composer and had a high profile and a number of official functions. However, many have suggested that his public persona was merely a mask which covered his true beliefs and concerns. In 1948 Myaskovsky was accused, along with Prokofiev and Dmitry Shostakovich, of 'formalism', a label which reflects the scrutiny to which these composers were subjected.

At times Shostakovich (1906–75) was undoubtedly torn between his role as a public figure in support of the regime and his personal vision as a composer. Whatever the political connotations, it is clear that he viewed the string quartet as a viable medium for the construction and articulation of his own personal sound-world. He composed fifteen quartets throughout his career. His First String Quartet, composed in 1938, is an outwardly simple work of which the composer later recalled: 'I visualised childhood scenes, somewhat naive and bright moods associated with spring.'¹⁶ While some may wish to claim that this description of the music is a conscious denial of the dark reality of the political climate of the time, it is, however one chooses to interpret it, a realistic description of the music. The first of four movements is based on its C major tonality and works through a highly condensed formal outline. The unassuming nature of the material is reinforced by the *moderato* tempo which helps convey the deceptive simplicity of the movement. This mood is effectively continued in the second movement, also headed 'Moderato'. This movement begins with a single melodic line in the viola which is clearly folk-like in character; yet, as in the first movement, this simplicity is deceptive. As the movement progresses it takes on different characteristics but not to the extent that it is rendered complex or inaccessible. This quartet's four-movement structure may lead to an association with the traditional nature of the string quartet. However, there is a remarkable sense of individuality to this music, for,

by this stage in his career, Shostakovich had already outlined some of the main features of his mature style. The seemingly simple and direct melodic lines, the motor-type rhythmic effects in the accompaniment, and an elusive sense of irony are already evident in his music and will reappear in various contexts, including the string quartet.

If the First Quartet is defined through its seeming simplicity, then Shostakovich's later quartets take on a more substantial and often darker quality. This is certainly the case with the Eighth Quartet in C minor Op. 110, undoubtedly one of Shostakovich's finest achievements. He composed it in 1960 during a visit to Dresden, where he witnessed the destruction caused by the Allied bombing of the city during the Second World War, and he consequently dedicated it to the memory of victims of fascism and war. However, although this suggests a public, outward-looking musical statement, the work itself is intensely private. In fact, it could be described as autobiographical. This sense of musical autobiography is provided by Shostakovich's use of his DSCH (D, E♭, C and B) motive, which is Shostakovich's own musical signature, as well as references to some of his own works, including the opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (the work which had led to his problems with the authorities), the First Symphony, the First Cello Concerto and the Tenth Symphony. As well as these self-reflexive gestures there are also citations from other composers, including the funeral march from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and passages from Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, a process which suggests that the work is preoccupied with memory. Nevertheless, Shostakovich shapes these elements into something which is uniquely his own and which suggests a unity born out of diversity and conflict.

The work consists of five movements. The first is a Largo which is built on an imitative, fugal texture. The initial idea is the D, E♭, C, B (DSCH) motive. This is introduced by the cello and is then taken up by the other instruments in ascending sequence. The effect is of a slow-moving but increasingly intense texture, which is dramatically heightened by the increased chromaticism of the movement's central section. The contrast between the Largo of the first movement and the Allegro molto of the second is extreme. However, Shostakovich achieves a simple but effective connection between the two, something he will explore in other quartets. The first movement ends with a cadence on C, with the second violin repeating G, but this is immediately replaced by the sustained G♯, which becomes the tonic of the second movement, with G now heard retrospectively as F♯, the leading note to G♯. Although this connection is technically effective, the impact of the sudden momentum of the second movement is one of surprise and forms one of this work's most notable features. The intensity of the first two movements is further contrasted by the scherzo-like Allegretto which again

uses the DSCH motive as its basic idea. The fourth and fifth movements revert to the solemn Largo of the opening movement. The finale recalls the first movement not only in terms of its tempo, but also in the use of the DSCH motive as a fugue subject, thus reinscribing the importance of memory evident in both the musical and the extra-musical dimensions of the work.

Shostakovich's later quartets continue to expand the parameters of the genre. The four-movement pattern of the First Quartet is generally avoided and the linking of movements becomes increasingly common. This expansion is most evident in the Eleventh (Op. 122, 1966) and Fifteenth Quartets (Op. 144, 1974). Both are multi-movement works with the movements interlinked. Shostakovich's last quartet has a valedictory and contemplative character and combines with other of his late works, such as the Fifteenth Symphony, to provide a final realisation of the personal vision of this remarkable composer.

Of the Soviet/Russian composers who emerged during the later stages of Shostakovich's career, perhaps the most notable is Alfred Schnittke (1934–88). Schnittke's individuality is best exemplified in his Third Quartet of 1983. The first of three movements begins with three distinct quotations: a cadential gesture from Lassus' *Stabat Mater*, the main thematic material of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* Op. 133 and Shostakovich's DSCH motive. This process recalls Shostakovich, a suggestion which is reinforced by the DSCH motive, and the construction of a musically inscribed memory. Schnittke builds a perception of 'the past' out of these materials in a way which avoids any overt neo-classicism or reconstruction of tradition. The effect of the music is highly distinctive, providing at times a glimpse of the 'polystylism', the pluralisation of style, which was to become the defining quality of Schnittke's music in general and, for some, an appropriate reflection of contemporary cultural conditions.

Hungary

In Hungary, Ernő Dohnányi (1877–1960) composed three quartets (1899, 1906 and 1926 respectively), while Kodály's (1882–1967) two quartets (Op. 2, 1908–9 and Op. 10, 1916–18) reflect his early style; the inspiration of Hungarian folk music is evident in the thematic materials, textures and sonorities of both works. However, Bartók (1881–1945) dominates Hungarian music of the period, his six string quartets constituting one of the peaks of the twentieth-century string quartet repertoire.

After several early quartets, which are now lost, Bartók composed his First String Quartet (Op. 7) in 1908–9. This remarkable work reflects a

transition in his style at this stage in his career. The first movement of what is a highly individual three-movement design begins with a canonic texture between the two violins in a slow tempo (*Largo*) followed by the introduction of viola and cello. The sound-world of this movement is still that of late Romanticism. The slow-moving texture and the heightened chromaticism combine to suggest a Tristanesque sense of yearning and instability, an interpretation which is perhaps reinforced by the knowledge of the end of Bartók's affair with the violinist Stefi Geyer and the fact that the opening material was derived from a four-note figure which Bartók associated with her in this and other works. The central section of the movement involves a change of texture and mood before the opening canonic texture is briefly regained. The movement concludes with a somewhat abrupt gesture which leads directly to the waltz-like second movement. A short transitional passage (*Introduzione*) provides the connection to the finale, which is on a much larger scale than either of the first two movements. Its expanded dimensions are related to a more complex formal and thematic design, based on sonata form, the first subject being a transformation of one of the main thematic ideas of the second movement.

The generally introspective nature of the First Quartet is carried forward into the Second. Composed between 1914 and 1917, it also uses the three-movement shape of the First. The first movement is generally relaxed (*Moderato*) and well balanced. This feeling is sharply contrasted by the second movement, which is fast (*Allegro molto capriccioso*) and direct in manner. The main thematic ideas of the movement are based on the tritone (B–F, later transposed to C–F♯ and D–A♭) and are largely fragmentary and sharply articulated. It is the third and concluding movement which lends an air of introspection. The slow-moving tempo and texture (*Lento*) offer a real contrast to the intensity of the second movement and the relaxed feel of the first, while also providing a fitting conclusion to the work.

Bartók's Third and Fourth Quartets come from the 1920s (1927 and 1928). The Third Quartet is the most radical of the six. Its musical language is defined through harsh dissonances while its compressed formal model, a single continuous movement with sub-divisions, is in sharp contrast to the earlier quartets, the brevity of the whole presenting a concise and direct statement of Bartók's musical direction at this point in his career. While the string sonorities may be similar and the expressive gestures equally intense, the formal dimensions of Bartók's Fourth Quartet are very different from the Third. It was originally planned as a four-movement work, but Bartók added another movement to produce a symmetrical five-movement pattern, with this sense of symmetry articulated throughout the work. The central point of this outline is the slow third movement, characterised by homophonic textures which create the impression of harmonic stasis. This

central movement is enclosed by two shorter fast movements, while the finale features loosely defined reworkings of thematic materials from the first movement.

The symmetry evident in the Fourth Quartet is repeated in the Fifth (1934), but with a scherzo as the central third movement. This scherzo is flanked by two slow movements (the second is marked *Adagio molto* and the fourth *Andante*). The fascination with symmetrical patterns is also evident within movements. The first movement consists of a sonata-form structure with three thematic ideas; these are stated in reverse order in the recapitulation, placing the development section as the mid-point of an arch structure. In contrast, the Sixth Quartet (1939) consists of the four-movement shape that was once the norm of the genre, without necessarily corresponding to the inherited forms and characteristics of the movements of the traditional quartet. The work begins with a solo viola melody which establishes a melancholic, nostalgic atmosphere, one which is perhaps a reflection of the changing political circumstances and the impending war, which would lead to Bartók leaving his Hungarian homeland for the USA.

Another significant composer who would leave Hungary for political and economic reasons is György Ligeti (b. 1923). Following the suppression of the uprising against the communist regime in 1956, Ligeti settled in Vienna, where he was able to enjoy a wide-ranging cultural environment. His First String Quartet, which is subtitled 'Metamorphoses nocturnes', was composed in Hungary between 1953 and 1954 but not performed until 1958 in Vienna. It is clearly an apprentice work and one which reflects the direct influence of Bartók, with the single-movement form reflecting an awareness of Bartók's Third Quartet and the folk-like rhythmic patterns and thematic shapes articulating an understanding of Bartók's more generalised interest in folk materials. In contrast, Ligeti's Second Quartet (1968) comes from an important and highly creative stage in his career and reflects a more mature response to the challenge of the string quartet. It is also a work which places great demands on the performers, utilising a wide range of ever-changing performance indications and frequent harmonics.

Having decided to remain in Hungary after 1956, Ligeti's near contemporary György Kurtág (b. 1926) has, albeit somewhat belatedly, found a wider reception in the West. Kurtág has not written consistently for string quartet, but his Op. 1, like Ligeti's First Quartet, reflects the influence of Bartók. This time it is the symmetrical shapes of Bartók's Fourth and Fifth Quartets that provide the models. Kurtág's Quartet consists of six short, fragmentary, rather Webernesque movements. The arch-like pairings of movements (the first and last movements relate, while the second and fifth provide a certain parallel) form an overall shape which gives some structural

logic to these fragmentary textures. After this initial work Kurtág has not returned to the quartet as a genre, although two of his works use the string quartet texture: *Hommage à Mihály András* (12 ‘microludes’ for string quartet), Op. 13 (1977), and *Officium breve in Memoriam Andreae Szervánszky* Op. 28 (1988–9). Both works reflect the more generalised concerns of Kurtág’s later career.

Poland

Polish music of the early twentieth century is dominated by the music of Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937), who strove to articulate a national identity in his music. He composed two quartets (1917, 1927). His First Quartet consists of three movements, opening with a substantial but concise sonata-form design in C major. Its introduction incorporates a broad lyrical theme which leads into the main *Allegro moderato*. This theme introduces some chromaticism which is further expanded as the movement progresses, generating an expressionist intensity which is reflective of Szymanowski’s music of this period.

Although the generation of Polish composers who emerged after the Second World War demonstrated an awareness of the historical genres of music (such as Lutoslawski’s sequence of symphonies), it did not show extensive interest in the string quartet. Nevertheless, there are some notable contributions, including one (1964) by Witold Lutosławski (1913–94) and two by Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933; 1960, 1968). However, despite their title, Penderecki’s works do not suggest any meaningful affiliation with the genre. His First String Quartet explores a challenging sound-world which demands new conceptions of playing techniques evident in Penderecki’s better-known works for massed string orchestra. As Wolfram Schwingler explains: ‘Everything hitherto demanded of a mass string orchestra in *Emanations*, *Threnody* and *Anaklasis* is demanded of the four soloists who constitute a string quartet. All the methods of sound production are now applied, the more clearly, to solo instruments: bowing, plucking, hitting one or more strings near or on the bridge or tailpiece, various kinds of tremolo or vibrato.’¹⁷

France

While our perception of the French string quartet of the early twentieth century may be largely conditioned by the quartets of Debussy and

Ravel, it is the prolific output of Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) which is sustained throughout the period. Milhaud composed eighteen string quartets, the first in 1912 and the last in 1950, all of which reflect in their own ways his own idiosyncratic sense of style. Of the composers who emerged in the years immediately following the Second World War, Pierre Boulez (b. 1925) has generally been received as the most significant. Like his contemporaries of the post-war avant garde, Boulez showed little interest in the traditional genres of music. In fact he set himself in direct opposition to any such notion of tradition. However, he has demonstrated an interest in the string quartet as an ensemble and texture in one early but important work, his *Livre pour Quatuor* of 1948–9. This work reflects Boulez's avant-gardist aspirations of the time. It was essentially conceived as a collection of movements from which the performers could determine their own selection, thus anticipating the interest in chance procedures. The actual musical details are also significant, as they suggest Boulez's progression towards the establishment of a total serialism, a concept through which all parameters of music, not just pitch, are subjected to the logic of serialism, and one which he would pursue in a number of major works.

The Czech lands

The two string quartets of Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) belong to that remarkable flowering of compositional activity which formed the final period of his life. The first, based on an interpretation of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, was composed in 1923, while the Second Quartet (*Intimate Letters*) was composed in the final year of Janáček's life and not performed until after his death. Both correspond to the outer expectations of the genre in that they both comprise four movements. However, their programmatic associations also create a certain distance from those expectations.

While Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) spent a large part of his life away from his native Czechoslovakia, he remained an essentially Czech composer. His large output featured a prolific sequence of chamber music, with his seven numbered string quartets (the first from 1918 and the final one completed in 1947) forming useful signposts to an understanding of his somewhat eclectic approach to composition. His Fifth Quartet (1938), for example, represents the stylistic position he adopted in the 1920s, with a focus on fast motor-like rhythmic patterns and a harsh dissonant quality which is still contained within an idiosyncratic understanding of tonality.

Scandinavia

The best known twentieth-century composer from the Scandinavian countries was undoubtedly Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), who strove to establish a national musical identity for his native Finland. After some early attempts in the genre, his only string quartet was composed in 1909 with the subtitle of *Voces Intimae* (see p. 277 above). In the key of D minor, this five-movement work has a wonderfully dark and sombre quality, generating a sense of introspection which is not dissimilar to aspects of Beethoven's late quartets.

Fartein Valen (1887–1952), Norwegian by birth and location, had a truly international perspective which sought to embrace some of the innovative features of modernism. His two quartets (1928 and 1930–1) reflect these wider concerns while also suggesting an awareness of the generic associations of the medium. The most prolific Scandinavian composer of string quartets was Vagn Holmboe (1909–96). This Danish composer produced ten unnumbered and twenty-one numbered quartets. The first three numbered quartets come from the 1940s, a time at which Holmboe achieved compositional maturity.

America

The recurrent historical narrative of twentieth-century American music features Charles Ives (1874–1954) as the focal point of an experimental, eclectic tradition, which is clearly evident in his two string quartets. The first consists of materials assembled between c. 1897 and c. 1909, *From the Salvation Army*; its content is often based on hymn tunes, a characteristic of Ives's music of this period. The Second Quartet (c. 1913–15) consists of three movements, each of which has a descriptive title – 'Discussions', 'Arguments' and 'The Call of the Mountains' – pointing to Ives' wider musical concerns.

In his own unique way John Cage (1912–92) sustained, in fact heightened, the experimental aspirations of American music. That he would show no interest in the traditional genres of music is a reflection of Cage's wider musical and cultural aesthetic, so it is little surprise that he did not produce a series of works titled string quartet. However, he did write a number of interesting works for the medium, among them his *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50). This work tends to be overshadowed by the percussion and prepared piano works of the 1940s and by the exploration of chance procedures in the 1950s. However, it is a notable work in its own right. The

'Four Parts' in the title refer in effect to four movements, each of which carries a descriptive title: 'Quietly Flowing Along', 'Slowly Rocking', 'Nearly Stationary' and 'Quodlibet'. However, these four parts do not in any way correspond to the individual characteristics of the movements of the Classical string quartet; rather they are in a sense programmatic/descriptive, drawing upon the images and atmospheres invoked by the Hindu sequence of the seasons, in which spring, summer, autumn and winter correspond to creation, preservation, destruction and quiescence. Part 1, 'summer', is followed by an ongoing decrease in tempo to part 3, 'winter', which is effectively static. This is followed by the contrast of the concluding quodlibet which signifies spring. Although it is through such shifts in tempo and character that the work is essentially defined, there is a general evenness of sonority and flatness of texture, with no real sense of climax or contrast. Cage returned to the string quartet in works such as *Thirty Pieces for String Quartet* (1983) and *Four* (1989) without showing any sustained interest in the ensemble of two violins, viola and cello.¹⁸

In contrast to Cage, Elliott Carter (b. 1908) and Milton Babbitt (b. 1916) in quite different ways present a modernism which is complex and challenging while recognising the aesthetic parameters of music. Both have produced a significant body of string quartets. Babbitt's six quartets extend from the early style of his First Quartet (1948, now withdrawn) through to the consolidation of his own rigorous realisation of serialism in the Third (1969–70) and Fourth Quartets (1970). Carter has also evolved a formidable musical language of which his sequence of five string quartets form a major element. Carter's First Quartet (1950–1) consists of a four-movement pattern which, although it at times alludes to composers such as Bartók and Berg, establishes some of the essential features of Carter's music, including the concern with temporal mobility through careful gradations of tempo. Carter's Second Quartet (1959) marked his 'belated arrival in American musical life'.¹⁹ This breakthrough work is concerned more with the individual characteristics of the four instruments rather than the combined effect. As David Schiff remarks: 'The first violin is "fantastic, ornate, mercurial", the second violin "has a laconic, orderly character which is sometimes humorous", the viola is "expressive", the cello "impetuous".'²⁰ Schiff goes on to suggest the possibility of this contrast of character having its origin in the Arguments movement of Ives's Second Quartet.²¹ The work also has a distinctive formal model, consisting of nine sections which are played without any break, even though four of the sections assume the appearance of movements. The sense of contrast evident through these sections and the characterisation of the instruments is developed in Carter's Third Quartet (1971) into a sense of collage through the superimposition of ideas and textures. Carter's string quartets represent his own 'high' or 'ultra-' modernism, within which a

complex, rigorous musical language is active. But this is a music which, through its conflicts and contrasts, enacts a real sense of musical drama and tension, qualities which make Carter one of the leading composers of his time. His string quartets articulate his vision of an 'ultra-modernism' while still retaining a residual grasp, at times a very distant one, on the inheritances and affiliations of the genre.