

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

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: 1810

Died: 1856

Composed: 1842

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Schumann's marriage to the young Clara Wieck in 1840 set off a great burst of creativity, and curiously he seemed to change genres by year: 1840 produced an outpouring of song, 1841 symphonic works, and 1842 chamber music. During the winter of 1842, Schumann had begun to think about composing string quartets. Clara was gone on a month-long concert tour to Copenhagen in April, and though he suffered an anxiety attack in her absence Schumann used that time to study the quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. His wife's return to Leipzig restored the composer's spirits, and he quickly composed the three string quartets of his Opus 41 in June and July of that year; later that summer he wrote his *Piano Quartet* and *Piano Quintet*. Writing string quartets presented special problems for the pianist-composer. The string quartets are his only chamber works without piano, and—cut off from the familiar resources of his own instrument—he struggled to write just for strings. Though he returned to writing chamber music later in his career, Schumann never again wrote a string quartet.

The *String Quartet in A Major*, composed quickly between July 8 and 22, is regarded as the finest of the set and shows many of those original touches that mark Schumann's best music. The first movement opens with a very brief (seven-measure) slow introduction marked *Andante espressivo*. The first violin's falling fifth at the very beginning will become the thematic "seed" for much of the movement: that same falling fifth opens the main theme at the *Allegro molto moderato* and also appears as part of the second subject, introduced by the cello over syncopated accompaniment. Schumann's markings for these two themes suggest the character of the movement: *sempre teneramente* ("always tenderly") and *espressivo*. Schumann's procedures in this movement are a little unusual: the development treats only the first theme, and the second does not reappear until the recapitulation. The movement fades into silence on the cello's *pianissimo* falling fifth.

The second movement brings more originality. Marked *Assai agitato* ("Very agitated"), it is a theme-and-variation movement, but with a difference: it begins cryptically—with an off-the-beat main idea in 3/8 meter—and only after three variations does Schumann present the actual theme, now marked *Un poco Adagio*. A further variation and flowing coda bring the movement to a quiet close. The *Adagio molto* opens peacefully with the soaring main idea in the first violin. More insistent secondary material arrives over dotted rhythms, and the music grows harmonically complex before pulsing dotted rhythms draw the movement to a close.

Out of the quiet, the rondo-finale bursts to life with a main idea so vigorous that it borders on the aggressive. This is an unusually long movement. Contrasting interludes (including a lovely, Bach-like gavotte) provide relief along the way, but the insistent dotted rhythms of the rondo tune always return to pound their way into a listener's consciousness and finally to propel the quartet to its exuberant close.