WORLD OF THE STRING QUARTET

Glossary

A  B  C  D  E  F  G  H  I  ...  K  L  M  N  O  P  ...  R  S  T  ...  V  W  ...

^definition adapted or paraphrased from Oxford Music Online (http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com)

~definition adapted or paraphrased from Virginia Tech OnMusic Dictionary (http://dictionary.onmusic.org/)

Absolute music – music of an abstract nature without any ties to an explicit program or story

Adagio – tempo marking meaning “slow”

Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato – tempo marking meaning “slow tempo with tender feeling and with passion”

Adagio ma non troppo – tempo marking meaning “slow, but not too slow”

Adagio molto – tempo marking meaning “very slow”

Allegretto – a tempo faster than andante but slower than allegro and in a lighter style. The term is also used for a short piece or movement with the tempo marked allegretto.

Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652) – Italian composer and singer. He composed mostly vocal music, but also composed a four-part piece for string ensemble that represents an early prototype for the string quartet.

Allegro – tempo marking meaning “fast”

Am steg – a directive to play at the bridge

Appoggiatura – A note of embellishment usually one step or half-step above (but sometimes below) the “main” note.

Aria – a term signifying any closed lyrical piece for solo voice with or without accompaniment, either independent or forming part of an opera, oratorio, cantata, or other large work. It has also been applied to instrumental music, implying a piece written on a vocal model.

Atonality – music without tonality, or music that is centered around no central key or scale. The term was first used to describe certain compositions by Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern, and Alban Berg, although Schoenberg generally considered his music to be pantonal.

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J.S. Bach (1685-1750) – German composer of the Baroque era. The most important member of the Bach family, Johann Sebastian Bach’s unique brand of genius combined outstanding musicianship with supreme creative powers, in which forceful inventiveness, technical mastery, and intellectual control are perfectly balanced. His musical language was distinctive and extraordinarily varied, surmounting the techniques, styles, and the general achievements of his own and earlier generations, and leading on to new perspectives which later ages have received and understood in a great variety of ways.

Baroque – from the Portuguese barroco meaning “rough or imperfect pearl.” The music of this period (c. 1600-1750), directly following the Renaissance and preceding the Classical era, is characterized by a lot of ornamentation, thus the name. The main composers of the Baroque era include Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Scarlatti, Handel, and most famously, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Basso continuo – A characteristic of Baroque-era music consisting of a bass part that runs continuously throughout the work, also called thoroughbass. If it is figured to indicate the harmony, it is called figured bass.

Baron Fürnberg – An early patron of Joseph Haydn who asked the composer to write a piece that could be played by four friends of music. Haydn was 18 at that time. Haydn accepted the invitation, resulting in his first string quartet. (This story comes from Haydn’s biographer, but musicologists approximate that Haydn’s earliest works for string quartet actually appeared when he was about 25 to 30 years of age.)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) – German composer whose early achievements extended the Viennese Classical tradition that he had inherited from Mozart and Haydn. As personal afflictions – deafness, and the inability to maintain happy personal relationships – loomed larger in his life, he began to composer in an increasingly individual style, and at the end of his life wrote his most sublime works. He came to be regarded as a dominant musical figure of the 19th century, and scarcely any significant composer since his time has escaped his influence or failed to acknowledge it. He is perhaps the most admired composer in the history of Western music.

Beklemmt – “anguished”

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) – German composer. The successor to Beethoven and Schubert in large chamber and orchestral forms, and to Schumann in miniature piano forms and songs, Brahms creatively synthesized the practices of the past with the language of mid- and late 19th century Romanticism. His works of controlled passion, deemed reactionary by some, progressive by others, became well accepted in his lifetime.

Burlesque – a humorous piece involving parody and grotesque exaggeration

Canon – strict counterpoint in which each voice exactly imitates the previous voice

Cavatina – In 18th- and 19th- century opera, a short solo song, simple in style and lacking the da capo (repetition of the first section at the end of the work). In instrumental music, this term is generally applied to a songlike piece of music.
**Chance music** – sometimes also called aleatoric music, this denotes music in which some element of the composition is not strictly notated but instead left to chance, generally because it is determined by performers on the spot.

**Chromatic** – music which proceeds in half steps.

**Classical form** – an approach favored by neoclassicists; music that adheres to conventional structures from the Classical era, such as sonata form.

**Coda** – closing section of a musical work

**Col legno** – a directive to play with the wood rather than the hair of the bow in order to produce a ghostly sound

**Counterpoint** – the art of combining two or more melodies to be performed simultaneously, according to a system of rules. In counterpoint, the melody is supported by another melody rather than by chords.

**Cross-rhythm** – a specific type of polyrhythm in which the regular pattern of accents in the given meter is contradicted by a conflicting pattern of accents (see: Hemiola).

**Cyclical** – A process in music where important themes may reappear at various points in a piece to bind the work together. In Mendelssohn’s Op. 13 quartet, for example, the composer uses the A major *Adagio* sections to open and close the work, lending thematic coherence to his composition. These A major bookends enclose the work, almost like quotation marks or like the effect of a camera zooming into a scene and zooming out at the conclusion of a movie.

**Development section** – the middle section of a movement in sonata-allegro form, in which the thematic material that was presented in the exposition (or first section) is developed through rearrangement, transposition, dynamic or textural variation, or other techniques of musical transformation.

**Disjunct** – a term applied to a melodic line that moves by leap (i.e. in intervals of more than a second) rather than in conjunct (stepwise) motion.

**Disjunct melodic shape** – a melodic shape that does not move smoothly or in stepwise motion. Instead, it might employ large leaps as a way to create interest or suspense.

**Dissonance** – the opposite of consonance, hence a discordant sounding together or two or more notes perceived as having ‘roughness’ or ‘tonal tension’. Dissonance is a form of tension that requires resolution.

**Dotted rhythms** – rhythms that generally involve some amount of syncopation or intentionally asymmetrical divisions of the beat

**Dynamics** – the intensity of volume with which notes and sounds are expressed.
**Expressionism** – an artistic style of the early 20th century, in which anxious inner struggles and yearnings gain expression through exaggerated melodic gestures and the emancipation of dissonance.

**Extended techniques** – new approaches by 20th century composers and performers to the use of existing instruments. Some examples include prepared piano and woodwind multiphonics.

**First and second themes** – the two themes employed in the exposition of a sonata form movement, usually contrasting in character and appearing in different key areas; the first and second themes generally reoccur in the recapitulation of a sonata, this time both appearing in the tonic key.

**First Viennese School** – a name mostly used to refer to three composers of the Classical period: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

**Frage** – German for “question”. Also the title of a song by Felix Mendelssohn.

**Fugato** – in the style of a fugue.

**Fugue** – a form of composition in which a theme is introduced by one instrument or voice, and is imitated by other voices in succession. Generally the voices overlap and weave in and out of each other forming a continuous, tapestry-like texture.

**Fugues and canons** – two types of contrapuntal textures where the parts are in active conversation with each other through strict imitation.

**Furiant** – a rapid and impassioned Bohemian dance in 2/4 or 3/4 time, with accents that shift frequently.

**Galant** – a clear, elegant, uncomplicated style that arose in the Pre-Classical era as a contrast to the more complex style of Baroque counterpoint. It is light, graceful, pleasing to listen to, and places importance on melody.

**Georg August Griesinger (1769-1845)** – German diplomat and writer. He was Joseph Haydn’s biographer.

**G. F. Handel (1685-1759)** – English composer of German birth who lived during the Baroque era. Though consistently acknowledged as one of the greatest composers of his age, George Frideric Handel’s reputation from his death to the early 20th century rested largely on the knowledge of a small number of orchestral works and oratorios. In fact, he contributed to every musical genre of his time, both vocal and instrumental.

**Harpshichord** – An early stringed keyboard instrument that produced tones by means of plucking strings with quills rather than by striking them with hammers, as in the modern piano.
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) – Austrian composer who, at the height of his career, was the most celebrated composer of his time. He excelled in essentially every musical genre, including symphonies, vocal works, and chamber music. He was a prolific string quartet composer (some 80+ in total) and he is commonly viewed as the father of the string quartet.

Hemiola – literally the ratio 3:2, this term is applied to a type of cross-rhythm in which music in 3/4 time is accented to make it sound like it is in 6/8 time, or vice versa.

Homophonic – a musical texture in which there is one melody, and all other voices move rhythmically together. Homophony is not to be confused with monophony, in which all the voices are performing exactly the same notes. In homophony there is a distinct melody with accompanying harmony, but all move in the same rhythmic pattern.

Impressionist – term applied to composers such as Debussy and Ravel, who were composing in the same general time and place as impressionist painters. The term “impressionism” in music refers to a focus on new kinds of scales (pentatonic, whole-tone, and modal) as well as exaggerated attention to musical color, while maintaining a somewhat traditional approach to form.

Intermezzo – an Italian term for “interlude”, this title usually designates a short instrumental composition, often occurring between more weighty pieces or movements.

“Ist es wahr?” – literally meaning “Is it true?”, this a line from Mendelssohn’s song or lieder “Frage”, which Mendelssohn wrote earlier in the same year (1827) as his first string quartet, Op. 13 in A minor. The three-note musical motive for the line “Ist es wahr?” in the song also appears in the first movement of the string quartet. According to Mendelssohn, the use of the “Is it true?” motive in the quartet is simply a point of departure. In other words, the music expresses the sentiment of the question, but does not represent the images captured in the poem.

Key signature – the group of sharp or flat signs placed at the beginning of a composition, immediately after the clef. The signs affect all notes of the same names as the degrees on which they stand, and thus define the key of the composition.

Largo – broad, slow

Legato – a directive to perform the indicated passage of a composition in a smooth, graceful, connected style, as opposed to staccato.

Lieder – German word for “songs” (singular: lied). Lieder have existed for many hundreds of years, but the word principally refers to a certain type of German solo vocal composition which came into prominence during the Romantic era.
Major tonality – a melodic and harmonic sound world based on intervals from the major scale

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) – Composer who stood at the forefront of German music during the 1830s and 40s. His musical style, fully developed at a young age, drew upon a variety of influences, including the complex counterpoint of Bach, the formal clarity and gracefulness of Mozart and the dramatic power of Beethoven.

Metronome – a mechanical or electronic device that keeps a regular beat (or pulse) and may be adjusted to any desired speed (tempo), generally used by musicians for practicing rhythmic passages.

Mighty Five – a group of 19th-century Russian composers led by Mily Balakirev, the other members being Alexander Borodin, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The group’s compelling goal was to produce music of a specifically Russian nature rather than imitating older European traditions.

Modal – term referring to music that is based upon the Gregorian modes, rather than to music based upon the major, minor, or any other scale.

Moderato assai – tempo marking meaning “very moderate”

Motivic development – altering or transforming musical motives throughout a piece, as a means of creating interest or tension while maintaining large-scale coherence in the work.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) – Austrian composer whose style represents a synthesis of many different elements into an idiom now regarded as the peak of Viennese Classicism. His mature music is distinguished by its melodic beauty, its formal elegance and its richness of harmony and texture, making Mozart arguably the most universal figure in the history of Western music.

“Muss es sein?” – A use of a musical question motive that preceded, and likely inspired, Mendelssohn’s “Ist es wahr?” motive in his first string quartet. Beethoven employed the question “Muss es sein?” or “Must it be?” in the final movement of his last complete work, the string quartet, Op. 135. Many have tried to explain Beethoven’s use of this question in the work, but without certainty. Perhaps, Mendelssohn’s own question “Is est wahr?” was meant simply to pay tribute to the quartet master whose works Mendelssohn so greatly admired. Beethoven died in March of the same year that Mendelssohn composed his Op. 13 quartet.

Neoclassicism – a movement of style in the works of certain 20th century composers who, particularly during the period between the two world wars, revived the balanced forms and clearly perceptible thematic processes of earlier styles to replace what were, to them, the increasingly exaggerated gestures and formlessness of late Romanticism. Some examples of neoclassicist pieces are Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms and Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony, although it would be incorrect to call those composers pure neoclassicists, as they experimented with many styles throughout their careers.

Notturno – nocturne, a piece evocative of night or performed at night.
Ostinato – a term used to refer to the repetition of a musical pattern many times in succession while other musical elements are generally changing.

Pantonality – music that is not in one tonality or key, but shifts freely among many or all keys.

Passacaglia – a continuous variation form. The basis for the form is a four bar ostinato, over which variations are written in the other voices. It is similar to the chaconne and is moderately slow in triple meter.

Pentatonic scale – a scale of five notes widely found in folk music of the world. Can be easily produced by playing five black keys on the piano in sequential order starting on F#.

Perotin (c. 1160-1225) – French composer whose identity is unknown. He wrote liturgical music in the style known as Ars Antiqua. One of the earliest known composers of music for four voices.

Phrygian – the third of the church modes. The mode based upon the third note of the major scale. In the key of C major, Phrygian mode would start on the key E, and include all the notes of the C major scale.

Pianissimo – extremely quiet dynamic

Pizzicato – a directive to pluck the strings with fingers rather than bowing them

Polka – a lively couple-dance in 2/4 time. It originated in Bohemia as a round-dance, and became of the most popular ballroom dances of the 19th century.

Polyrhythm – the simultaneous use of different rhythms in separate parts of the musical texture

Polytexture – the simultaneous use of different musical textures in a given passage or movement

Polytonality – the simultaneous presentation of multiple tonalities in a polyphonic texture

Preghiera – an aria in which a character pleads for divine assistance

Presto – quick

Programmatic – A word that can be applied to a musical work with extra-musical meaning or association

Recapitulation – the final section of a movement in sonata form, in which the thematic material from the exposition and development is presented once again, usually in its original form, but this time entirely in the tonic key of the composition (rather than having a second thematic group in the dominant key, as in many sonata expositions).
**Recitative** – a musical texture that imitates speech

**Ritardando or ritard.** – a directive to perform a certain passage of a composition with a gradual slowing down of the tempo

*The Rite of Spring* – ballet in two parts with music by Igor Stravinsky, composed from 1911-1913, and today played frequently as an orchestral concert work. Widely considered to be one of the most influential works of the 20th century.

**Romanze** – an instrumental composition or movement, usually slow, which expresses “romantic” or lyrical qualities

**Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725)** – Italian composer of the Baroque era. Composed a set of works entitled *Sonate a Quattro per due violini, violetta, e violoncello senza cembalo*, which is an early prototype for the string quartet.

**Scherzo** – An Italian word deriving from the German Scherz (“to joke”). Since Beethoven’s time it has been applied generically to any movement that takes the place of a minuet in a sonata cycle, and it has also been used to indicate a comic or ironically comic composition, usually fast-moving and often one movement within a larger work.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828)** – Austrian composer who made seminal contributions in the areas of orchestral, chamber, and piano music, and most especially the German lied. The richness and subtlety of his melodic and harmonic language, the originality of his accomplishments, his elevation of marginal genres, and his enigmatic life have invited a wide range of readings of both man and music that remain among the most hotly debated in musical circles.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)** – German composer and music critic. While best remembered for his piano music and songs and some of his symphonic and chamber works, Schumann made significant contributions to all musical genres of his day and cultivated new ones as well. His dual interest in music and literature led him to develop a historically informed music criticism and compositional style. A leading exponent of musical Romanticism, he had a powerful impact on Brahms and many others.

“Senza cembalo” – meaning “without harpsichord.” The harpsichord, which is a forerunner of the pianoforte, which in turn is the forerunner of the modern day piano, was necessary in Baroque-era chamber music because it created harmonic filler and helped fortify the cello’s part. By inserting a 3rd soloist – the mid-range voice of the viola – Scarlatti, in his *Sonate a Quattro per due violini, violetta, e violoncello senza cembalo*, was able to create a complete four-voice string texture that no longer required this harmonic filler provided by the harpsichord.

**Sequence** – to exactly (or almost exactly) repeat a musical passage at a higher or lower level of pitch

**Sonata form** – also called sonata-allegro form, this is the form generally used for the opening movement of the Classical sonata. It consists of an exposition, in which thematic material is presented for the first time, followed by the development, in which the thematic material presented in the exposition is
developed (rearranged, transposed, and otherwise transformed), followed finally by the recapitulation, in which the thematic material is presented once again, often followed by a short closing theme.

*Sonate a Quattro per due violini, violeetta, e violoncello senza cembalo* (c. 1715-25) – A work by Alessandro Scarlatti that represents an early prototype for the string quartet. The words “senza cembalo” or “without harpsichord” indicated that a new chamber music approach, that of four-voice string writing, was on the horizon.

*Sotto voce* – in an undertone or barely audible (applied to both vocal and instrumental performance)

*Stepwise* – also called “conjunct,” a term applied to a melodic line that moves by step (i.e. in intervals of a second) rather than in disjunct motion (by leap).

**G. P. Telemann (1681-1767)** – German composer. The most prolific composer of his time, Georg Philipp Telemann was widely regarded as Germany’s leading composer during the first half of the 18th century. He remained at the forefront of musical innovation throughout his career, and was an important link between the late Baroque and early Classical styles.

*Texture* – term which refers to the vertical structure of a composition; how many parts or voices there are, what the configuration (close, open, etc.) of the voices is, and how the voices interact. Some different types of textures are homophony, monophony, and heterophony.

*Theme and variation* – a musical structure or style of composition which first presents a basic theme and then develops and alters that theme in successive statements, called variations.

*Tonal* – term referring to music that is based upon major and minor tonalities rather than on modal, twelve-tone, or other musical systems.

*Tonal or harmonic instability* – the use of chromaticism, dissonance, and other techniques that destabilize the perceived sense of music being in a certain key

*Tonality* – music that is organized around a tonic pitch based on a major or minor scale

*Tone cluster* – a group of adjacent notes (usually on keyboard instruments) sounding simultaneously

*Trio sonata* – The standard chamber music medium of the Baroque era, written for two soloists (usually two violins) with “basso continuo” which includes a harpsichord and a low-range instrument like the cello.

*Tristan und Isolde* – an opera in three acts by Richard Wagner to his own libretto, based on Strassburg’s *Tristan* and ultimately on Arthurian legend. The opera is regarded as a milestone in the history of Western music for its highly individual musical expression that is chromatic, dissonant, and dark.

*Variation treatment* – compositional technique that involves changing a musical statement melodically, harmonically, or contrapuntally so that it remains recognizable but is noticeably altered or developed.
Whole-step – an interval of two semitones; a major second~

Whole-tone scale – a scale formed entirely of whole steps (major seconds) in sequence. It lacks the fundamental harmonic and melodic relationships of major-minor tonality.^

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