

# THE HISTORY OF THE STRING QUARTET

A string quartet is a group of four musicians who play a particular combination of string instruments: two violins, a viola and a cello. Over the years (from the 1750s to the modern day) many composers have written for the string quartet, and string quartets have been performed in grand concert halls, private homes and for special events such as weddings, celebrations and even coronations!

## The People who Play:

Two *Violinists* who play *Violins*.



A *Violist* who plays a *Viola*.



A *Cellist* who plays a *Cello* (also known less commonly as a *Violoncello*).



## Music for String Quartet: a timeline

### 1750s — 1820 The Classical Era



Joseph Haydn, known as the 'Father of the String Quartet' is the first to write string quartets — he composes a 68 quartets.



Mozart contributes to the repertoire, expanding its range and complexity with a further 26 quartets.



Beethoven develops the string quartet with innovative form and expression. His 'late quartets' are seen even today as some of the greatest ever written.

### 1780 — 1910 The Romantic Era



Schumann's quartets display a mastery of traditional forms, combined with fantasy and lyricism.



Mendelssohn's quartets have been described as being exceptionally powerful and eloquent.



Brahms enriches the tradition, with (as with many composers in this period) a focus on emotional depth, virtuosity & rich textures.



Dvořák amongst others, moves away from the traditional intimate style of quartet writing to a more 'orchestral' texture.

### 1900 — Today The 20th Century - Modern Music



Debussy's unorthodox textures, ethereal melodies and distinctive French harmonies lend a dreamlike quality to his quartets.



Bartok's own Hungarian style takes inspiration from traditional folk music, tunes and harmonies mixed with classicism and modernism.



Shostakovich, living in Soviet Russia, pours his soul into his quartets with sharp contrasts, elements of the grotesque, and unsure tonality.



String quartet writing remains vibrant and dynamic, with ongoing exploration by contemporary composers.

## The Instruments:

### History

The violin, viola and cello evolved from the Renaissance instruments called viols. They are made from wood and have four strings, they can be played in different ways - 'Arco' which means with a bow and 'Pizzicato' where the strings are plucked [pulling a string with the finger and letting go quickly].

### Violin

The violin is the smallest and highest pitched string instrument with the softest and sweetest sound. The player holds it under their chin, holds the neck with their left hand and the bow in their right.

### Viola

The viola is the second in size with a lower pitch than a violin. The viola is held in a similar stance to the violin, the instrument supported by the collarbone and shoulder.

### Cello

The biggest of the three, with the deepest sound. The player holds the instrument with the between their knees, supports the neck with the left hand and bows with the right.

A person who makes or repairs violins is called a luthier. In the 17th century, there were several families of luthiers who were very good at making instruments. The most famous violin makers were Stradivarius, Amati, and Guarneri.

