

Title	Presto C major for String Quartet
Time of Origin	ca. 1895
Premiere	unknown
Duration	ca. 7 min.

Arnold Schönberg's career as a composer likely began during his violin lessons: "Even before the age of nine, I started writing small and eventually larger pieces for two violins, imitating the music I played with my teacher and a cousin. When I could play the duets of Viotti, Pleyel and others, I imitated their style. So I learned to compose to the extent that I learned to play the violin." In his youth, he wrote mostly songs and smaller instrumental works, probably inspired by his lively chamber music making with friends. When he found a classmate who played the viola, the duo line-up became a trio. With the money Schönberg had earned by teaching German, he obtained Beethoven scores: "[...] they were the Third and Fourth Symphonies, two of the Razumovsky Quartets, and the Grosse Fuge for String Quartet, Op. 133. From then on, I had the urge to write string quartets." The meeting with the violinist and later physician Oskar Adler, Schönberg's friend from his secondary school days, was decisive: Adler taught him the basics of harmony and ear training, and together they also played 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century classics of the string quartet literature among a circle of friends. Schönberg later vividly recalled that time: "We wanted to play quartets by Mozart and Beethoven, so Adler brought a larger viola strung with zither strings, on which the pitch and range of a cello could be produced. I was supposed to play this instrument, which I did, using viola fingerings, since I didn't know any better. Soon afterwards, I acquired a cello, and I also played it with the same fingerings I had used on the violin, viola, and also the (so-called by me) violoncello. This went on for quite a while until Adler heard from a real cellist that fingerings on the cello were different." Playing quartets had also remained vivid in Adler's memory, as he reported in 1948: "I often think back to the time when we played quartets together, in the Dienstbotenkammerl in Augartenstraße on Sunday afternoons, and the subsequent walks in the Prater engaging in philosophical conversations [...]." From then on, Schönberg kept honing his compositional skills in numerous quartet projects until he completed a string quartet in D major in 1897, his first surviving large-scale composition.

"The four string quartets I published had at least five or six predecessors. The habit of writing so many string quartets had developed gradually." One of these early precursors is the Presto in C major for string quartet, which belongs to the estate of Arnold Schönberg. Stylistically, the undated work can be assigned to the period around 1895, making it one of Schönberg's earliest known compositions. In its structure, the piece corresponds to a sonata rondo: a fugato refrain alternates with longer developmental passages. The musical texture is permeated by motivic interplay; only after the refrain returns a second time is

there a distinctly melodic episode in the first violin. The opening theme commences with a lively gesture reminiscent of Dvořák – Schönberg's model at the time. The melody itself, however, hardly develops in a streamlined fashion; instead, a short motivic formulation develops into a longer phrase. The relatively generic source material – triadic formations with added passing notes in a dotted rhythm – allows the form of the piece to emerge as a natural process of motivic development. The main and secondary themes are directly related to each other and thus shape the entire course of the movement – here, it is Beethoven and Brahms that have become the main source of inspiration.

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