

---

## Quartet in D-major

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Title          | Quartet in D-major                       |
| Time of Origin | 1897                                     |
| Premiere       | 20 December 1898, Wien, Bösendorfer-Saal |
| Duration       | ca. 23 min.                              |

1. Allegro molto
2. Intermezzo. Andantino grazioso
3. Andante con moto. Variation 1–5
4. Allegro

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.

Arnold Schönberg considered Mozart, Brahms, Beethoven and Dvořák to be his sources of inspiration at that time. Participating in chamber music making probably played an

essential role on the influence of these composers. Dvořák, who otherwise would hardly be counted among Schönberg's models, figured prominently in the concert life of the time. It is therefore hardly surprising that his style, along with that of Johannes Brahms, is very noticeable in the string quartet. Schönberg was largely self-taught as a composer. By his own account, he was able to write his first proper sonata-form movement only after the eagerly awaited volume "S" of Meyer's *Konversationslexikon* had appeared. Nevertheless, Schönberg also received invaluable advice from his friend and later brother-in-law Alexander Zemlinsky, whom he consulted again and again when he encountered difficulties. The D major quartet was thoroughly revised after Zemlinsky's evaluation. Schönberg completely rewrote the first and last movements, and the second and probably the third were replaced. Zemlinsky seemed quite pleased with the result, and with his support the quartet was given its unofficial premiere in a private circle on March 17, 1898, by the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein, which was dedicated to promoting contemporary music. A few months later, on December 20, The Fitzner Quartet gave its public premiere in the Bösendorfer-Saal of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. The review in the *Neue Freie Presse* on December 24 was decidedly positive: "This year's first quartet evening by Messrs. Fitzner and his fellow performers contained a very pleasant surprise. [...] A new string quartet by Arnold Schönberg not only achieved extraordinary success, but also made the impression on all music lovers present that its author was a true talent who had spoken his first significant word." The aforementioned influence of Dvořák can be observed above all in the stylistic elements of some themes, though hardly in the sense of outright quotations. Rather, Dvořák's influence is discernible in certain rhythmic and melodic details. Only the theme of the first movement is surprisingly reminiscent of Dvořák's famous "American String Quartet" in F major, op. 96. Structurally, however, Johannes Brahms's influence is clearly evident. Even this early work contains latent features of what Schönberg would later call "developing variation." The quartet begins with a lively movement in sonata form whose secondary theme is relatively broad. A tendency towards development already appears from the beginning: the theme is divided into separate motives that are then further developed individually. Nevertheless, Schönberg is still far removed from the complex thematic structure of his later works, since the structure of the movement as a whole follows a regular pattern. The following "Intermezzo" impresses with its distinctive, restrained soundscape. The strings play muted throughout. The theme is presented first in the viola, and then in the first violin. This is followed by a passage at a tempo twice as fast, with numerous three-note groupings rapidly succeeding one another. The repeated opening section is followed by a coda in which the theme, underpinned by pulsating figures in the second violin and viola, seems to float away in the high notes played by the first violin. The slow movement presents a series of variations in which the theme is first introduced by the cello and soon accompanied by imitative figures in the viola. This polyphonic approach becomes more thoroughly elaborated during the course of the movement. Here, Schönberg demonstrates at an early stage his deep understanding of the Brahmsian compositional tradition. In addition to motivic similarities, the finale also shares other features with the first movement. The rousing main theme – which commences after a short, motto-like figure – is again more reminiscent of Dvořák due to its distinctly folk-

music feel. Structured in sonata-rondo form, this music provides a brilliant conclusion to Arnold Schönberg's earliest string quartet, which, rather than a student exercise, deserves the status of a full-fledged chamber music composition.

Eike Feß | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien  
[www.schoenberg.at](http://www.schoenberg.at)