Mozart and Haydn frequently played together with (Stadler) Mozart’s Quintetts; (Stadler) particularly mentioned the 5th in D Major (K. 593)...the one in C Major (K. 515), and still more that in G minor (K. 516)...1st Viola either Mozart or Haydn in turn.

It appears that the 1781 publication of Haydn’s Six String Quartets, Opus 33, served as inspiration for Mozart to compose a similar collection. Mozart composed these superb chamber works during a period that spanned from late 1782 to early 1785. The esteemed Viennese company, Artaria, published the Six “Haydn Quartets” in 1785. The score included this dedication by Mozart, written in Italian:

Vienna, 1 September 1785
To my dear friend Haydn,

A father who had decided to send out his sons into the great world, thought it his duty to entrust them to the protection and guidance of a man who was very celebrated at the time and who, moreover, happened to be his best friend.

In like manner I send you my six sons to you, most celebrated and very dear friend. They are, indeed, the fruit of a long and laborious study; but the hope which many friends have given me that this toil will be in some degree rewarded, encourages me and flatters me with the thought that these children may one day prove a source of consolation to me.

During your last stay in this capital, you yourself, my very dear friend, expressed to me your approval of these compositions. Your good opinion encourages me to offer them to you and leads me to hope that you will not consider them wholly unworthy of your favor. Please then receive them kindly and be to them a father, guide and friend!

From this moment I surrender to you all my rights over them. I entreat you, however, to be indulgent to those faults which may have occurred to him that the thread of Mozart’s life could be cut by the inexorable (Fates) the very next year.

Mozart died on December 5, 1791 at the age of 35.

I. Adagio; Allegro—The Quartet opens with an extended and mysterious slow-tempo introduction (Adagio), whose harmonic ambiguities inspired the work’s “Dissonance” nickname. Some of Mozart’s contemporaries and early successors assumed the composer had made errors while transcribing the score. But the genius of Mozart’s bold harmonic explorations in the Adagio becomes clear when the ensuing Allegro sprints into the brilliant sunshine of C Major. The first violin leads into the principal theme that undergoes an extensive treatment by the quartet. The first and second violins present the second theme, opening with a pair of quarter notes. The opening theme serves to launch the development section that finally concludes with a brief pause. The violins lead the start of the recapitulation of the principal themes. The Allegro finally resolves (perhaps a bit surprisingly) to a serene close.

II. Andante cantabile—The slow-tempo second movement glows with a rapt lyricism, tinged with pathos. The year after composing this Quartet, Mozart completed his opera, Le nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro). In that work, much the same kind of heartfelt lyrical expression may be found in Mozart’s writing for the soprano Countess Almaviva, who yearns for the resumption of her husband’s affections.

III. Menuetto. Allegro—The third movement is a Minuet (Menuetto, Allegro), a dance in triple meter. The principal Minuet offers a compelling juxtaposition of piano and forte dynamics that is continued in the central C minor Trio episode. The movement concludes with a reprise of the Minuet.
IV. Allegro molto—The finale, like the opening movement, is cast in sonata form (exposition, development, and recapitulation of central themes). The theme that launches the finale also recalls its counterpart at the start of the Allegro portion of the first movement. Mozart proceeds to lavish an abundance of thematic material upon a finale notable for its unbounded high spirits, right to the bracing final bars.

String Quartet No. 2, Opus 17 (1915–7)
Béla Bartók was born in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now, Sînnicolau Mare, Romania), on March 25, 1881, and died in New York on September 26, 1945.

Hungarian composer Béla Bartók wrote his Second String Quartet during the First World War. Bartók was 33 at the outbreak of the “War to End All Wars.” On October 30, 1914, Bartók wrote to a friend: “I also belong to the age-group which is to be called up for military service. There is a good chance I shall be rejected on health grounds. But nowadays there’s nothing to worry about. I am in advance.” Bartók did indeed receive a medical deferment, and spent the war years studying the folk music of his native land, as well as of other regions.

The String Quartet No. 2 was one of the few works Bartók composed during World War I. He dedicated the piece to the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet, who performed the work’s première in Budapest on March 3, 1918. Bartók’s friend and fellow Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály described the Second Quartet’s three movements as: “1.) A quiet life; 2.) Joy; 3.) Sorrow.” For his part, Bartók confessed: “My second string quartet was too unaccustomed for the public of the day.”

Without question, the Bartók String Quartet No. 2 is a challenging work, both for performers and audiences. But while the challenges are profound, so too are the rewards of this complex, heartfelt, and deeply expressive work.

I. Moderato—After a brief, pulsating introduction, the first violin plays the opening movement’s central theme, launched by a three-note motif, and juxtaposing 9/8 and 6/8 meters. The majority of the subsequent themes are derived from the opening material. After a brief pause, the viola launches the development section with the three-note motif, soon repeated by the first and second violins. The development builds to a passionate climax that finally subsides, leading to the first violin’s dolce restatement of the opening theme, the start of the recapitulation. In the final bars, the violins’ ascent is capped by the cello’s arching phrase.

II. Allegro molto capriccioso—Bartók not only studied and maintained a lifelong affection for the folk music of his native land, he believed it was an integral component of concert music. Among the three movements of the String Quartet, the second most profoundly reflects that aesthetic. Over a repeated, intense accompaniment by the second violin, the first violin plays the movement’s central theme, a vigorous dance, burstingly energy and momentum. That dance returns throughout, couched in a variety of instrumental settings, and alternating with contrasting episodes. A Prestissimo setting of the dance provides the whirlwind finish, sealed by the ensemble’s fortissimo unison outburst.

III. Lento—The slow-tempo finale opens with an introduction by muted strings. The first violin introduces the mournful initial theme. The themes that follow, and their subsequent modified restatement, are all tinged with a pathos that occasionally erupts into cries of pain. Pizzicato notes, uttered by the viola and cello, mark the Quartet’s despairing conclusion.

String Quartet No. 3 in D Major, Opus 44, No. 1 (1838)
Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, Germany, on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig, Germany, on November 4, 1847.

Felix Mendelssohn composed his String Quartets, Opus 44, Nos. 1–3, during 1837–8, an especially happy period in the composer’s life. On March 28, 1837, Mendelssohn wed Cécile Jeanrenaud, and their first child was born the following year. During this time, Mendelssohn was also enjoying great success as a composer, pianist, and conductor of the superb Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Although the D Major Quartet bears the catalogue listing of Opus 44, No. 1, it was the last of the three that Mendelssohn composed. He began work on the D Major Quartet in Leipzig in April of 1838, and finished the piece that July 24, while in Berlin. On July 30, Mendelssohn wrote to violinist Ferdinand David (concertmaster of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the soloist in the world première of the composer’s immortal 1844 Violin Concerto, Opus 64), “I have just finished my third Quartet, in D Major, and it pleases me greatly. I hope it may please you, too. I think it will, since it is more spirited and seems to me to be more grateful to the players than the others.”

Mendelssohn dedicated the trio of Opus 44 String Quartets to the Crown Prince of Sweden. The premiere of Opus 44, No. 1, took place at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on February 16, 1839, with a quartet comprising Ferdinand David and C.W. Ulrich, violins, Carl Traugott Quiessner, viola, and cellist Andreas Grabau.

I. Molto Allegro vivace—The first violin immediately sings the joyful, wide-ranging initial principal theme. Repetitions of the theme are juxtaposed with more restrained episodes. The first violin also introduces the second principal theme, pianissimo and in the minor key. Echoes of the initial theme round out the exposition. An expansive and energetic development section builds to the fortissimo start of the recapitulation. The opening theme predominates in the closing bars, capped by a trio of emphatic chords.

II. Menuetto. Un poco Allegretto—in Mendelssohn’s time, it was not unusual to reverse the traditional order of a slow-tempo second movement and a dance-inspired third. What is unusual is Mendelssohn’s use of a Minuet (Menuetto. Un poco allegretto), an elegant dance in triple meter, popular in Haydn and Mozart’s time. The ensemble, led by the first violin, sings the Minuet’s lilting melody. A contrasting minor-key episode is based upon an undulating motif. A reprise of both principal components rounds out the Minuet.

III. Andante espressivo ma con moto—The Quartet’s slow-tempo movement opens with the first violin playing a yearning melody over sixteenth-note counterpoint in the second violin. The second principal melody, marked cantabile, is introduced in a similar fashion. A high-flying episode for the first violin leads to a reprise of the opening melody, with the viola now providing a lovely countermelody. The second melody follows in due course, leading to the Andante’s hushed conclusion.

IV. Presto con brio—As in the finale of his “Italian” Symphony, No. 4 in A Major, Opus 90 (1833), Mendelssohn concludes his D Major Quartet with a lively Italian dance known as a saltarello. The ensemble’s opening fanfare launches the finale, and the quicksilver saltarello melody. The second principal melody offers far more restraint and intimacy. But the predominant atmosphere is one of a festive celebration that sprints to an exuberant close.