

Choose two string quartets by different composers showing how their use of melody and harmony has changed across the period.

### **Mendelssohn**

As with most composers, the influence of Beethoven looms large (Brahms was later to refer to Beethoven as the “giant marching behind”). In the case of his Eb Quartet op 12, this manifests itself as follows:

- Direct quotation from the Harp Quartet – rising minor 7<sup>th</sup> on tonic brings about progression to subdominant
  - Subdominant leanings become an important harmonic colour – eg 7ths in bass line in transition sections
- Thematic material of entire quartet derived from first three bars of 1<sup>st</sup> movement introduction
  - Four-note motif in bar 2 becomes influential in 3<sup>rd</sup> movt
  - Also development F minor theme derives from 1<sup>st</sup> subject
- Expectation of 4-bar periodic phrasing throughout (and delivered, eg 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> subjects) with regular alternating imperfect and perfect cadences
  - But often violated, eg opening introduction – perfect cadence in tonic by end of b2 (and frequent rests), then an swering phrase suggesting G minor (which will become an important key area throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> movt), ushering in contrapuntal working of four -note motif
- Importance of 4-part counterpoint (refer to B’s Grosse Fuge or other fugal movements in quartets) and its capacity for dissonance
  - Opening motif of counterpoint introduction emphasizing 4 -3 suspension
  - Later including expressive accented passing notes (eg cadence point before 1<sup>st</sup> subject)
  - Central part of development – anguished contrapuntal dissonance

Key characteristic of M’s melodies = falling away (also in pitch) from strong opening to feminine ending: both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> subjects do this, as does the new theme brought into the development (2<sup>nd</sup> violin – F minor)

All melodies built around firm tonic -dominant relationship (though with colourful excursions to G minor and Eb minor) and diatonic harmony; functional harmony (NB 7ths; also modulatory passages – sequence); also in Sonata Form, emphasizing the importance of two contrasting melodies (and key centres); a particularly magical moment being the transition from G minor at the end of the development to a re -emerging tonic Eb major with a slowed -down 1<sup>st</sup> subject – through D – Bb7 – Eb)

### **Debussy**

Also strongly influenced by Beethoven

- Title gives Key and opus number as a homage to the Austro -German tradition
- Written in four movements along a traditional structure
- Employs elements of cyclic form (as does Mendelssohn)

But the Beethoven influence is more about establishing D’s quartet as a serious composition: although stated in G minor, it is barely diatonic – the opening immediately emphasizes VIIb as a minor chord, showing a strong modal (Phrygian) influence.

A key driver for the piece is D’s searching for a “mode that tries to contain all the nuances” - the opening theme recurs on several occasions re-harmonised and with different tonal centres. Colouristic / spontaneous sounding. GIVE EXAMPLES

Unlike classical periodic phrasing, this quartet is based on repeated two -bar phrases, often branching out into arabesques or accompanied by Wagnerian “forest murmurs” textures. Written in a broad sonata form, there are two contrasting themes (both 2 bars long), one rhythmically assertive with its emphasis on the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat of the bar, the other lyrically shaped