String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 20 No. 5, Hob III:35
Josef Haydn (1732–1809)

The six quartets of Opus 20 were composed at Esterháza in 1772 and published that year with a dedication to Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, a Hungarian diplomat and cellist.

Life at Esterháza, where Haydn took up residence in 1766 (see the program note for June 9), proceeded with intensity, as Prince Nicholas Esterházy expended substantial sums of time and money on creating an arts center in the countryside. The palace itself was an architectural and construction marvel that took decades to complete. In addition to the usual below-stairs assortment of butlers, cooks, kitchen boys, housekeepers, and milkmaids, the Prince employed an artistic staff: two painters, who not only did the family portraits but also designed stage sets for the two opera houses and created frescoes for the palace walls; a librarian; a museum curator for the painting gallery; landscape caretakers for the ever-expanding gardens and park; actors for the puppet theater; ballet dancers and a ballet master; men and women choristers and soloists; and an orchestra of about 25 musicians, led by the Kapellmeister, Josef Haydn.

Haydn had particularly fine musicians, who gave his music excellent performances as soon as he set their parts before them, ink still drying. The orchestra’s virtuoso concertmaster, Luigi Tomasini, was a great friend, in addition to being the violinist whom Haydn admired above all others. From 1761–69, Haydn’s principal cellist, also a good friend, was the excellent Joseph Weigl, who was replaced by the esteemed Anton Kraft, when Weigl left to join the Austrian court orchestra in Vienna. Haydn himself played second violin to Tomasini.

An important and unusual item on Haydn’s job description: composing baryton music for the Prince, an avid amateur performer on that obscure instrument (a bass-voiced viol—sort of—with many strings to be bowed and plucked). Perhaps because of all the practice he got writing at least 150 baryton trios (sort of like doing stretches before a marathon), Haydn became remarkably adept at composing for small string ensembles in his first years at Esterháza. In fact, in later years, he requested of his publisher, Artaria, in Vienna, that they forget about his first 12 published string quartets, and begin assigning Opus numbers with the three sets that he created in the late 1760s and early 1770s, at Esterháza. Those three sets included the string quartets Op. 9, Op. 17, and Op. 20.

Earlier, Haydn had named his quartets “divertimenti.” With these three sets, and ever after, he adopted “String Quartet” as the title for such works. With Opus 20, Haydn wrote final movements using fugal materials, a significant new feature of string quartets that other composers imitated in years to come. Also in Opus 20, Haydn began to dislodge the minuet movement from second place; in Nos. 2, 4, and 6, the minuet is the third movement. These shifts in style may seem small, on paper. The effect, upon hearing the works, marks a huge difference.

The first movement of the F-minor Quartet is in classic sonata form, with a minor-mode principal theme and major-mode second theme. The coda lends darkness to the final bars of the
moderately paced movement. The minuet, similarly somber, is followed by a sweet cantabile Adagio. The two-subject fugue makes a sophisticated conclusion to the quartet.

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 20
Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983)

Written in 1948; first major performance at the 25th Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) in Frankfurt, 1951.

Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (because of his family’s Catalan and Italian origins, he liked to pronounce his last name “jee-na …”) graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires. Early successes as a composer led to his appointments, in 1941, as professor of music at the National Conservatory and the San Martín National Military Academy.

In 1945 the regime of Juan Perón took issue with Ginastera’s political views—he signed a petition supporting civil liberties—and he was forced to leave the Military Academy. Ginastera accepted a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to spend 1946–48 in the United States. In this country he visited the composition programs at The Juilliard School and Columbia University in New York City, as well as Harvard, Yale, and the Eastman School, in Rochester. Ginastera also cemented a warm friendship with Aaron Copland, with whom he studied at Tanglewood.

In the same period, Ginastera’s music, already known for its rhythmic excitement and brilliant orchestral colors, received performances by the NBC Symphony, among others. Upon his return to Buenos Aires, in 1948, he played a significant part in creating an Argentine division of the ISCM and accepted an appointment as director of the music and theater conservatory at the National University of La Plata.

The String Quartet No. 1, composed in 1948, reflects all the stimuli that Ginastera had gathered to that point: strong Argentine folk elements, traditional composition structural methods, and the techniques of the contemporary idiom that he had encountered in the United States. The ISCM selected String Quartet No.1 for a performance at its 25th anniversary festival in Frankfurt in 1951. The enthusiastic reception that the quartet performance excited burnished his international reputation, and in the coming years his music appeared in concert halls, ballet theaters, and opera houses throughout Europe and the U.S.

At home in Argentina, his name stirred another kind of excitement: once again the Perón government forced Ginastera to leave his academic position, and he was unable to teach until 1956, the year after Perón’s defeat. Having already composed music for motion pictures, Ginastera chose to work in the film industry to supplement his income during the years that he spent persona non grata in his own country.

In 1963 Ginastera took the leadership of the Latin American Centre for Advanced Musical Studies at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella. For eight years he concentrated on bringing distinguished music faculty—including Aaron Copland, Olivier Messiaen, Iannis Xenakis, Luigi Nono, and Luigi Dallapiccola—to work with outstanding young composer fellows.

In 1971 Ginastera emigrated to Switzerland, where he spent the last years of his life, composing with unflagging energy and to increasing renown.
In String Quartet No 1, Ginastera demonstrates his admiration for and understanding of indigenous Argentine music by infusing the work with imitative materials of his own invention. The vigor and macho ebullience of the first movement suggests gauchesco [cowboy] music; the second movement features a sparkling, frenzied malambo—a dance in the criollo tradition. The quiet third movement calls up the night sounds of a gaucho’s guitar serenade; Ginastera completes his quartet with another brilliant evocation of the dance rhythms and folk songs of Argentina.

Piano Quintet in F Minor
César Franck (1822–1890)

*Composed in 1878-79, the Quintet was premiered January 17, 1880, at the Société Nationale in Paris by the Marsick Quartet, with the pianist, and dedicatee, Camille Saint-Saëns.*

César Franck had an influence in the music world in inverse proportion to his public renown. As a professor of composition at the Paris conservatory and a virtuoso organ improviser, Franck drew a circle of admirers and adherents who included Henri Duparc, Georges Bizet, Vincent d’Indy, Ernest Chausson, and Claude Debussy. In 1866, Franz Liszt admiringly compared his organ skills to those of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Franck trod a difficult path from his childhood on. His Belgian father, determined to create a cash cow from his wunderkind, kept him on a short leash for many years. Franck’s extraordinary music talents earned him multiple prizes in composition, theory, organ, and piano at the conservatories in Liège and Paris, and he achieved a bit of local fame as a teenage concert pianist. When he reached his 20s, he escaped his father’s domination and made a life for himself in the French capital.

Active as a renowned church organist, Franck composed operas, oratorios, and solo music for piano and organ. His Symphony in D minor (1886) and the Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra (1885) receive occasional performances in the concert hall today. But his reputation as a composer rests now principally on three chamber music works. The Sonata for Violin and Piano, composed for the great Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe (1886), and the String Quartet in D major (1889) have won secure places in the repertoire, as has the Piano Quintet in F minor, completed in 1879.

The quintet’s first performance, while successful, had its embarrassments. Ever an unassuming and generous person, Franck had written the work for his colleague Camille Saint-Saëns, a piano virtuoso, and dedicated the work to him. Saint-Saëns, for his part, considered Franck a rival, and he performed in the premiere, with the Marsick String Quartet, with apparent reluctance. At the conclusion of the performance, while the audience cheered the performers and the composer, Saint-Saëns walked off the stage, pointedly leaving the score behind him on the piano—the score that Franck had just presented to him. This public rebuff was further supported by Madame Franck’s semi-private dismissal of the quintet as inconsequential. Some say that Franck wrote this passionate work under the spell of a young lady student with whom he was infatuated, so perhaps Cécile Franck’s critical faculties were somewhat compromised.

The quintet, like many of Franck’s compositions, is built upon a germ of a musical idea, a motto theme, which provides structural unity by appearing in every movement. Franck called these themes “cousins,” and he habitually used them as building blocks. The quintet’s principal “cousin,” a tightly constructed, chromatic melodic unit, is clearly discernible, and memorable.
After a long, slow introduction, that motif appears in the opening movement, in A-flat, pulsing around the dominant note, E-flat. The piano states it first most fervently, joined by all the strings, which take the theme to a great summit before the quiet ending. The second movement maintains a sweet lyricism introducing the motif “Lento con molto sentimento,” and swelling to a large climax. This movement, too, ends quietly. In the third movement, the theme dominates in a grand and passionate finale.