The String Quartets of George Onslow

First Edition

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For Loren, Skyler and Joyce—Onslow Fans All

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Introduction & Acknowledgments

This study of George Onslow's string quartets first appeared in *The Chamber Music Journal*, a quarterly publication which I edit. It appeared between 1997 and 2000 in thirteen parts.

If a contest were held to determine which unknown or little-known chamber music composer was the most deserving of great recognition, I can think of no other composer more deserving than George Onslow. Certainly, there may be others who are as deserving, but none more so, and I hasten to add that I am hardly alone in this view. Over the years Onslow, with my help, has made scores of admirers. I cannot recall one session in which a work of his I introduced did not receive universal praise from all who had either played it or heard it played. Those who have familiarized themselves with his music have come to understand that his name should stand high in the pantheon of honored composers.

While here and there, as of late, a few of George Onslow's thirty six string quartets have been recorded and therefore described, albeit briefly, in the accompanying CD jacket notes, as far as I know, there has never been any comprehensive, systematic and detailed treatment of these great works in English (or quite possibly in any other language) It had been a long-time goal of mine to attempt such a project and when formally asked back in 1992 to undertake it, I quickly agreed. Only then, however, did I realize the extent of the difficulty and enormity of the task I had taken on. Not only had there never been a book or detailed article about the string quartets, there had never been a book about George Onslow to appear in English. It was through Albert Novakoff of the International Onslow Society that I learned of an unpublished doctoral thesis about the composer which had been written in the early 1980s. When it proved impossible to obtain a copy from either the author or University Microfilms Inc., Mr. Novikoff generously made his personal copy of the thesis available to me. The thesis, authored by Richard Franks, is a massive two volume affair, the great bulk of which deals with the composer's ancestors (who are tracked by the author back to 1174), his immediate family and his life. There is also a fair amount of discussion and analysis of certain works, most notably those for piano and opera. The string quartets are, for the most part, dealt with rather cursorily. This is, I suppose, understandable in view of the fact that Mr. Franks, a pianist, never played any of these works and would not have had much if any opportunity to hear them. The great value of his thesis, in my view, is twofold: First, it provides a fair amount of detail about the composer's life and circumstances, which heretofore had been unknown. This, in itself, was no mean accomplishment, and Mr. Franks, by his own admission, spent 10 years tracking down living relatives and searching family archives and other files before he was able to tell what little is known of George Onslow's life. Secondly, his thesis examines and attempts to answer the question of why it was that Onslow's reputation suffered so severely after his death. This had always intrigued me especially since, during his lifetime, Onslow was held in the highest regard in Germany, Austria and England, if not France. No less discerning a critic than Robert Schumann ranked Onslow's chamber music with that of Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn. I am indebted to and wish to thank Richard Franks for his permission to quote from his thesis and use the fruits of his research in this study. All historical facts relating to Onslow's life are taken from his thesis, *George Onslow; A Study of his Life, Family and Works.* Doctoral Thesis 1981, University of Texas, UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Beyond learning the details of Onslow's life there was also the problem of obtaining the music. At the time I began work on this study, there were no string quartets of George Onslow's in print. (Happily, several have been reprinted in the past 12 years). My problem was solved by

the generous help of Dr. James Whitby and Dr. Nicholas Cunningham who provided me with copies of many of the string quartets which, on my own, I had been unable to find.

Lastly, one needs, of course, to play the works. Although it is common place for reviewers of music, many of whom are not even musicians, never to have performed the works they review, I personally believe such stuff to be of limited value, and in the case of players of very little value. An evaluation made by merely obtaining the music and studying the cold printed notes, as a musicologist might do, is certainly of questionable value as far as performers are concerned. It is not always easy to find colleagues who are interested in exploring the wider quartet literature. Far too many players, and especially professionals, will play nothing but the 'big names' disdainfully dismissing, often without a hearing or at least an open-minded one, any composer of whom they have never heard. I have been very fortunate to have been associated over the years with many fine players who patiently, and to their ultimate delight, followed me on the odyssey of exploring the complete set of George Onslow's string quartets. Their kindness and sense of adventure allowed me to examine this repertoire, often from less than ideal copies, close up and at length. In particular I wish to thank violinists Loren Silvertrust, Skyler Silvertrust, Mark Talent, Henry Coretz, Eric Eisenstein, and Claudia Watson and also violists Kathleen Tumminello, and Morton Altschuler.

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André George (not Georges) Louis Onslow was born in 1784 at Clermont-Ferrand in France of an English father and a French mother. As was the custom at that time, he was named for his godfather and his godmother (André Jouvenceau d'Alagnac and Louisa d'Espinchal) but also for his very important paternal grandfather (Lord George Onslow). Edward Onslow, the composer's father, was descended from one of the most politically prominent English families of the 18th Century. Edward's grandfather, Arthur Onslow, had served as speaker of the House of Commons from 1727 until 1760. Edward's father, Lord George Onslow, was also an important member of the King's government during the last part of the Century and was made first Earl of Onslow in 1801. In 1780, Edward, who was Lord George's second son, entered Parliament at the age of 22 after coming down from Oxford. But his career was cut short almost immediately by involvement in a public scandal which resulted in the bringing of a charge of homosexual behavior. To avoid prosecution, Edward fled England for France. Two years later, in 1782, he married Marie Bourdeille, a daughter of a noble family from the province of Auvergne. Although he was to become the founder of the French Onslows, throughout Edward's life as well as that of his son George, the tie to the English Onslows remained close. Indeed, Edward took his bride and baby son to visit England in 1785. Lord George Onslow remained very attached to Edward and in fact was the primary financial support for Edward and his family for the next 15 years.

The composer's early years were uneventful. However the French Revolution was to change all that. By 1789, Edward Onslow had, with his father's financial help, purchased property and had made new friends and gained a position of social responsibility. When the revolt spread and the Reign of Terror began, Edward Onslow, now a wealthy property owner in the Auvergne, was threatened. But for nearly eight years, with the exception of one short stay in a local prison, he and his family escaped any harm. This was to change in 1797.

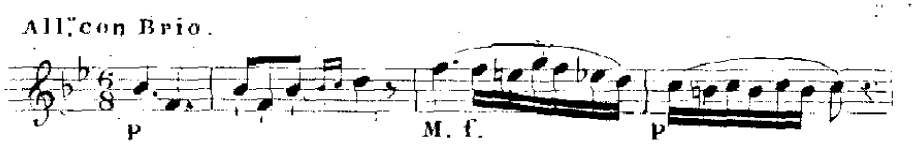
The first information we have about the composer is a letter dating from 1795 by Edward answering an inquiry from some French authority as to the character and educational background of his sons. He describes George, then 11½, as extraordinarily sweet and docile and one who liked to read. George spoke English fluently, if not entirely grammatically at that point. He was good at drawing but "the talent in which he excels is music." Edward further states that George played the Forte Piano in a "manner very distinguished for his age." That this was so was no accident. Edward was determined that his four sons would have the social accomplishments which were held in high esteem by people of his class. Music and drawing were among these social skills and one of George's brothers, Arthur, became a well-known painter in central France around mid-century. It is generally agreed that George Onslow's most important early teachers included the Alsatian pianist, N. Hüllmandel, the then famous Austro-Czech piano virtuoso, Jan Dussek, and most importantly the German born English pianist, John (Johann) Cramer, one of Clementi's most famous students. Just where he studied with them has never been resolved. (Most likely in London or Hamburg)

During 1797, Edward's situation became precarious and he was forced to flee, first to Lyon, then Paris and finally in 1798, when he was denounced by Jacobin police as an enemy sympathizer, to Rotterdam. According to Richard Franks, other than Edward's nationality and the fact that France and England were at war, there were no grounds for the charges. George, then 14, went to Rotterdam to serve as a companion and for moral support. Shortly after arriving, the political situation deteriorated causing Edward to move again, this time to the neutral city of Hamburg. During his sojourn in Hamburg, 1799-1800, Edward hired teachers to continue George's academic education as well as his instruction in music. In the summer of 1800, Edward was allowed to return to France.

George Onslow's interest in composition, by his own admission, dates from just after this period (1801). Despite the fact that he had studied piano off and on for ten years with three well-known piano-virtuosi, it was probably his entree into the world of chamber music that led to this interest. Upon his return to the Auvergne, George became involved with several amateur musical societies and was invited to take part on the condition that he study the cello. This he did, eventually acquiring a virtuosic technique. Subsequently after playing and studying the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, he decided that he wished to write such works himself. Recognizing his lack of knowledge of composition, he set out to teach himself and seems to have done this although he may have had some scant instruction in chordal progression and nothing more from an amateur and friend of his who had been a student of Charles Catel (1773-1800), a Parisian composer. Onslow finally began seriously making sketches in either 1804 or 1805. What is truly amazing, given their very high quality, is that the first dozen or so works published by Onslow were done without the benefit of instruction from a professional composer. When later these works subsequently achieved great popularity, wild and unsubstantiated claims which have ultimately been shown to be false, were made by the few early biographers Onslow had. Among these claims was that he had visited Vienna sometime between 1799 and 1806 and had studied with Beethoven. Such spurious propositions were based on the fact that it was known that Onslow had been in Germany around 1800. After Onslow's death, his wife debunked this rumor catagorically stating that he had never been to Vienna and that the only composer with whom he had studied was Anton Reicha and that was in Paris.

But before he was to do this, he had already composed a set of three string quintets, Op.1 Nos.1-3, a piano sonata, Op.2, three piano trios, Op.3 Nos.1-3 and his first three string quartets which were composed in the summer of 1807 and published as his Op.4 Nos.1-3. They were dedicated to Felipe Libon, then violinist to the Empress Josephine. By any standard, these are an extraordinary set of first quartets, especially for a fourth opus.

The **First Quartet, Op.4 No.1 in B Flat Major** begins with an *Allegro con brio* in 6/8 time. From the very start we hear a new voice. The melodic language is certainly not that of Haydn or Mozart. It opens in a bravura fashion, full of drama, in many ways anticipating the spirit one finds in middle Schubert.



At once, one notices the part writing. The four voices are treated almost as equals. One finds nothing to compare to the treatment of the viola or the cello in all of Haydn with the possible exception of Op.20 No.2, and in Mozart not until the three *King of Prussia Quartets*. (K.575, 589 & 590)

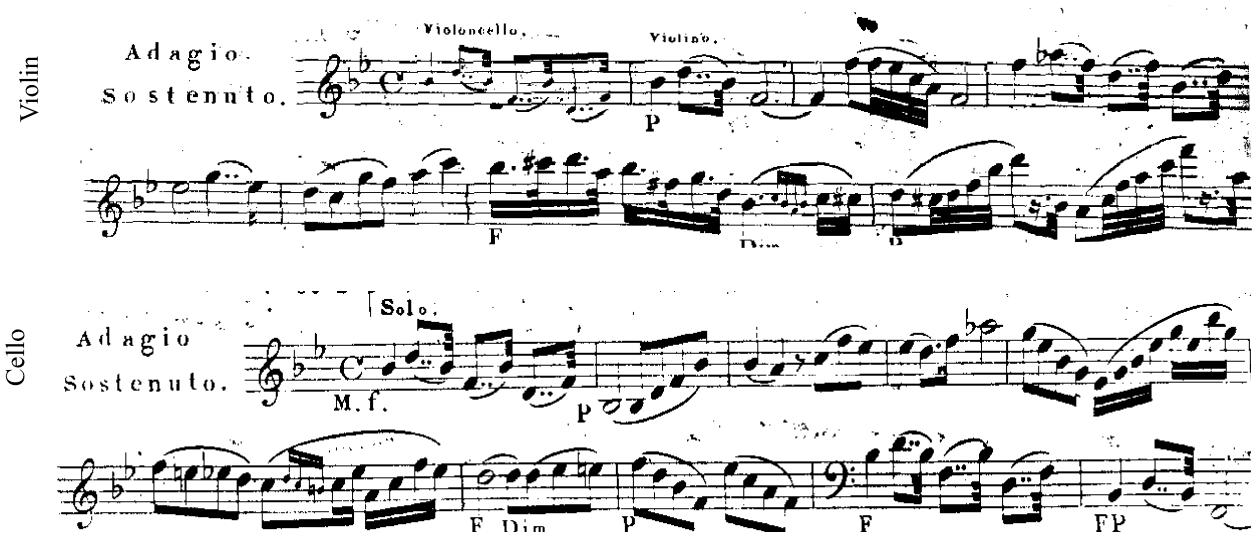
The second movement, *Andante sostenuto* is in 2/4. It sounds like an English or Scottish folktune and is treated in a fashion which was to become a favorite of Onslow's; almost, but not quite, like a set of variations. One is reminded of the way Haydn handled his thematic material in the slow movement of the *First Lobkowitz Quartet*, Op.77 No.1

A superb *Minuetto Allegro* follows, no longer the classical minuet but more on the order of a scherzo. The part writing leaves nothing to be desired. A contrasting trio in minor, rather than releasing the tension of the minuet, is full of fire. It is often said that the Op.18 Quartets of Beethoven were light years ahead of nearly anything being written for the next 20 years. This movement stands out as an exception to that statement.

The *Finale, Allegro* is the kind of moto perpetuo of which Onslow showed himself to be a master. In 4/4, it is a rhythmically interesting movement with a dramatic and military flavor. One is reminded a bit of early Beethoven, but there is a heightened sense of the dramatic and a greater richness of melody.

The opening movement to the **Second Quartet, Op.4 No.2 in D Major** is in cut time and marked *Allegro vivace*. The main theme is based on the interesting use of a grace note rhythm. Without making concerto-type demands on the first violinist, the part writing here requires a fair amount of agility especially in several moto perpetuo sections. In this movement, the first violin carries more of the thematic material than is usually the case with Onslow, who usually takes care to achieve a greater equality and interest in his part writing. However, it would be misleading to think this dominance of the first violin sinks to the level of Spohr in his Quatours Brillantes or even of Haydn say in his Op.17 quartets. Interestingly, hearing the first movement to this quartet immediately after the last movement to the First (something I did after my quartet recorded all three in preparation for this book), one is struck by the feeling that Onslow seems to have taken up just where he left off and it may well be that he composed this movement immediately after finishing the finale to the First Quartet. One other thing suggests this: The movement could clearly serve as a finale and is far more suitable than the movement he actually wrote which strangely enough would have been quite serviceable as a first movement. One need only hear the rip-roaring finish to reach this conclusion.

In the following *Adagio sostenuto*, the cello is given a short introductory solo before a lovely duet between it and the first violin is heard. (see example top of page 7) Upon reflection, one realizes that an effect like this was not used by any of the well-known Viennese Classical composers with the exception of Mozart in the slow movement to K.589. Of great beauty, the writing is in cantilena style with chromatic episodes of the sort one does not encounter until late Spohr. The short middle section provides a great contrast and is full of drama and operatic passion. It is ironic that one of the criticisms leveled at Onslow is that his music shows little if any passion. (this is only one of several stupid remarks H. Woollett makes in his article on Onslow in Cobbett's *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music,* an article which would lead nearly



anyone with only a passing acquaintance with Onslow's chamber music to wonder whether Woollett had actually ever played or heard the music about which he was writing)

Minuet is not at all what comes to mind upon hearing the opening to the *Menuetto Allegro* to the Second Quartet. Powerful, driving triplets, together with upward soaring and downward plunging chromatic runs, give the main theme quite an original sound. The forward motion is never relaxed. Although the trio's theme, which is begun by the cello, is somewhat lighter in feel, it nonetheless continues this propulsion and gives a Mendelssohnian flavor to the movement. It is absolutely first rate in conception and effect.

The finale, *Allegretto con moto* in 6/8, is a bit of a let down after all that has come before. This is not to say that it is a bad movement, but it is not, especially for its length, an entirely effective finale. The opening pastoral subject in stark contrast to the preceding movement. The development finds long running passages given to the first violin and then the cello.

The **Third Quartet, Op.4 No.3 in a minor** begins *Allegro moderato,* but this marking is somewhat misleading as the stormy and dramatic opening is full of power and drive. Allegro fuoco or patetico might have been more fitting and one senses that the 'moderato' may have been used to hold the performers back from playing it overly fast, which would certainly deprive this fine piece of its striking affect. Here, Onslow uses triplet rhythms in quite a novel fashion anticipating late Schubert. The closing bars to the movement, though not marked as such, seem clearly to be an exciting stretto which leaves the listener gasping for breath.

For the first time, Onslow chooses to put a *Menuetto-Allegretto* (in reality a scherzo) as the second movement. One finds many of Onslow's most striking quartets have this arrangement. The placement seems, for Onslow, to work better because his "Menuettos" or scherzos are usually so compelling and full of excitement that they provide little contrast and, in some cases, actually take away from his finales. Although one is reminded a bit of a Mendelssohn scherzo, the sound and thematic material is pure Onslow. A relaxed and beautifully contrasting trio follows. It is a hunting musette, one hears the call of the horns in the double stops of the viola and cello.

Recorded String Quartets of George Onslow as of March, 2008*			
String Qt. No.	Performers	Type	Disk Name & No.
No.1, Op.4 No.1	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 329
No.4, Op.8 No.1	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 793
No.7, Op.9 No.1	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 060 2
No.7 2d Movmt	Coull String Quartet	CD	ASV DCA 808
No.9, Op.9 No.3	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 060 2
No.10, Op.10 No.1 (Mislabeled as Op.8 No.1)	Trio a Cordes Francais	LP	CCV 1002
No.10, Op.10 No.1 (Mislabeled as Op.8 No.1)	Trio a Cordes Francais	CD	Koch 3-1623-2
No.10, Op.10 No.1	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 329
No.19, Op.46 No.1	Could String Quartet	CD	ASV DCA 808
No.20, Op.46 No.2	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 793
No.21, Op.46 No.3	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 329
No.22, Op.47	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 060 2
No.23, Op.48	Quatuor Debussy	CD	Advidis Valois 4749
No.25, Op.50	Mandelring Quartet	CD	CPO 999 793
No.30, Op.56	Coull String Quartet	CD	ASV DCA 808
No.35, Op.66	Quatour Parrenin	LP	CCV 1004

A lovely *Andante sostenuto,* which except for the fact that it was written when Schubert was 10, could be said to be in the tradition of the Schubert chamber-lied. Sad and religious in feeling, one hears the resignation of a final leave-taking. The closing bars to the slow movement of Schubert's D.956 cello quintet come to mind. Onslow might well have been subtitled the movement Ave Maria. There is great depth of feeling, further accentuated by the chordal sonorities of the lower strings. Excellent in every way.

The very fine *Finale, Allegro* is in 2/4. To the accompaniment of racing 16th notes, an exciting and fast-moving melody is introduced. Light in touch, it is developed, briefly as a fugue. When critics speak of Onslow's works being influenced by the Viennese classics, the Haydnesque treatment (for example in Op.76 No.5) of the thematic material here springs to mind. But to this must be added the influence of the Parisian Concerts Spirituel which is evident in the sense of drama and fetching use of chromaticism. This first rate movement is a fitting conclusion to a work that belongs in the concert hall.

In sum, both professional and amateurs alike will be charmed by these works. Of special interest to professionals looking for a striking work from the early 19th Century is the Third Quartet, Op.4, No.3. But it should be said that both Quartet Nos.1 & 2 are certainly as fine if

*As of 2010, sSeveral other work have been recorded, including string quintets, piano trios, his wind quintet, a septet and his nonet.

not finer than so many of Haydn's which are brought into the concert hall for no other reason than they are by that very great man.. As such, Nos. 1 and 2 also deserve to be heard. With regards to difficulty, it is fair to say, that these quartets are comparable in the technical demands they make on the performers to those presented by Beethoven's Op.18.

Onslow's first three string quartets, Op.4 Nos.1-3, were composed around 1807. These works were, as I pointed out, for all practical purposes written without Onslow having had the benefit of any formal composition lessons. The reader can only appreciate the significance of this fact by either listening to or playing these surprisingly fine works.

This brings me to the subject of whether the sheet music to any of Onslow's string quartets can be obtained and which if any of his quartets can be heard on disk. Sadly all of the music is long out of print, however the Cobbett Association does have the parts to several quartets which are listed in the Catalogue. This probably will be the easiest way to get the parts. As to recordings, only a few of his 36 quartets have been recorded, but most of these have appeared in the last 5 or 6 years on the medium of CD and are thus of good quality. I have created a table listing recorded quartets. (see page seven)

Continuing on then with Onslow's life and string quartets, one of Onslow's early biographers, (Fetis) comments that about a year after the publication of his first three quartets, Onslow became concerned that he had no thorough training in the art of composition. To this end, in the winter of 1808, Onslow sought out Antonin Reicha, who had just arrived in Paris from Vienna, as his teacher. Given the fact that Reicha was Onslow's only teacher of composition, his influence on Onslow is worth considering. Reicha, though today better known than Onslow (especially to wind players for his marvellous quintets), is hardly a household word. A profficient violinist, flautist and pianist, Reicha and his compositions were quite well-known during his lifetime, especially in France, where his books on theory became the standard texts for nearly half a century. During his considerable time spent in Vienna, Reicha became a close friend of both Haydn and Beethoven, the latter, who on several occasions, highly praised Reicha's compositions. It may well have been from Reicha that Onslow acquired his 1808 edition of Beethoven's Rasumovsky Quartets, the Op.59. There can be little doubt that Reicha was responsible for Onslow's thorough knowledge of and esteem for the Vienna classics, especially the works of Beethoven, whose music was at the time, little known and little loved in France. As pointed out above, some of Onslow's biographers believed, because his compositions clearly show a knowledge of Beethovenian developments, that Onslow actually studied with Ludwig in Vienna. Of course, he did no such thing.

Contemporary reports indicate that Reicha was a superb teacher and most French students with any promise eventually found their way to him. Reicha was not an inflexible pedant, certainly not like Cherubini—the other great teacher in Paris at the time—who was a thorough going traditionalist. He stressed freedom of expression and avoided imposing his will on those he taught. One of Reicha's biographers states his method of teaching was 'open-ended, but complete, too thorough for those who wanted merely the barest essentials of technique.' Berlioz recounted that he had learnt a lot from Reicha in a short time and considered Reicha's discussions "extremely clear and concise and unlike most teachers, he hardly ever failed to give his pupils the reason for the rules he recommended to them." Reicha was very fond of chamber

music and was considered an expert in the art of the quintet, both string and wind, having apparently made an exhaustive study of Mozart's great quintets. Without doubt, Onslow was exposed by Reicha to the new technical possibilities of musical instruments and the up until then unheard of possibilities of combining them in performance. Onslow's studies lasted only until the spring of 1809, but given Reicha's economical and thorough methods, this was probably all Onslow needed in view of his already extensive instrumental training. In sum, Reicha's greatest influence on Onslow's technique was in the realm of both harmony and rhythm. Reicha placed great importance on these two elements in his teaching and it was Onslow's own lack of confidence in harmonic writing which had led him to Reicha in the first place. Onslow himself subsequently wrote that he remembered his 'witty and instructive sessions' with Reicha with enthusiasm and great gratitude.

The year 1808 was a propitious one for other reasons as well. In that year, he married an heiress and daughter of a Chevalier from an old French noble family, Charlotte-Delphine-Françoise de Fontanges or Delphine as she was generally known. The marriage made Onslow wealthy in that his own father, Edward, settled considerable property, in France as well as England, with their rents, on George as part of the marriage contract. And, Delphine brought with her a large dowery as well as her future inheritence. From those who knew her, Delphine was described as a 'model of charm, wit and beauty.' Between 1808 and 1813, George and Delphine had three children: two girls and a boy, the first born in 1809. According to Dr. Franks, Onslow was quite fond of his children, spent considerable time with them and made sure that their early education was properly carried out.

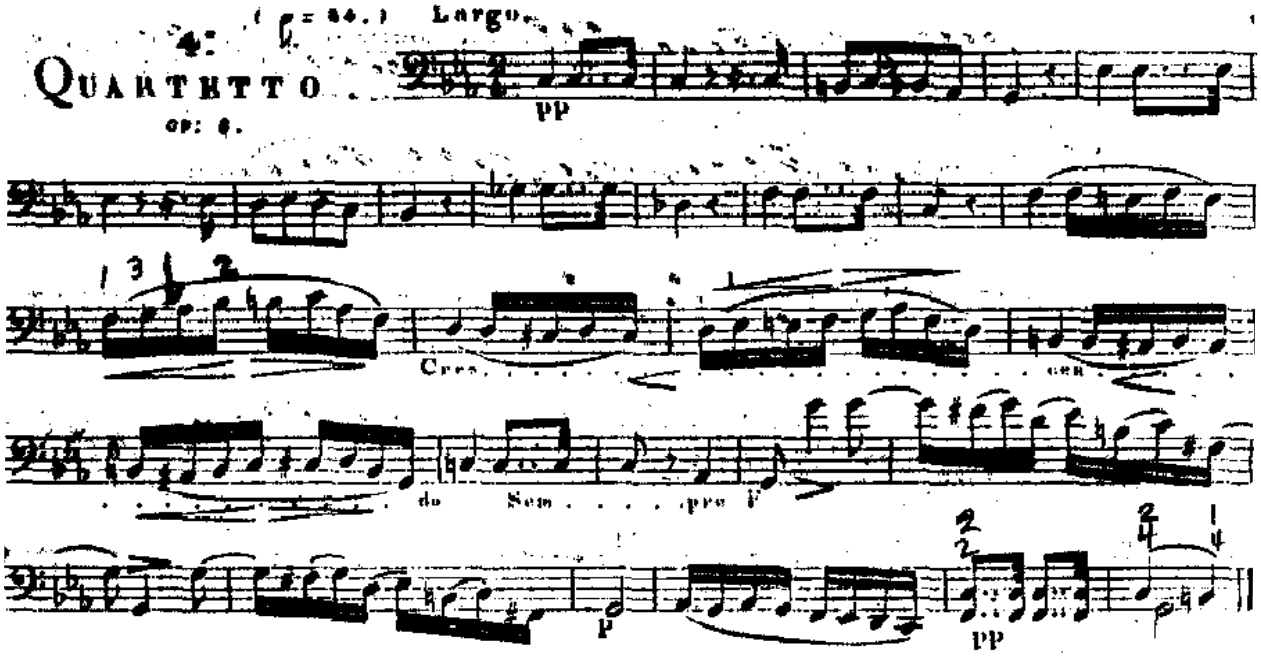
It is worth remembering that during the period with which we are dealing, France was continually at war. Onslow, unlike his younger brothers, never served in the French Army. He certainly was subject to the draft under French law. However, being the eldest, he was able to gain exemption under a 'privilege of primogeniture and also under a law granting the wealthy the right to hire a substitute or enlist a volunteer in their place. Dr. Franks comments that there is no evidence Onslow had any enthusiam for the Napoleonic struggle or 'La Gloire.' Certainly the fact that he was half English with very close family ties to his English relatives may have created divided loyalties.

Between 1809, the time when he finished his lessons with Reicha, and the fall of the Empire in 1814, Onslow wrote one more set of string quartets. Just which set this was, is the subject of some speculation. Pleyel, Onslow's earliest and primary publisher, brought out three new string quartets, Nos. 4-6 as his Opus. 8. Dr. Franks believes these were actually composed after Onslow's Opus 9 quartets, also a set of three. He suggests they were written in 1815 and states they were published in 1816. According to Dr. Franks, the quartets which are known as the Op.10, (String Quartets Nos.10-12) are actually numbers 4-6. To support this supposition, he notes that a manuscript to the Op.10 quartets exists which lists them as Op.8. Franks does not state if this manuscript is in Onslow's hand, but writes that it is not known why Pleyel chose to publish these quartets, believed to be written sometime between 1809 and 1814, as Op.10. He postulates that Onslow 'may have delayed publication in order to make revisions, a practice which seems to reoccur throughout his life.' If that was the case, then, in actual fact, though begun before the Op.8, they were finished after and are later works. Having not seen this manuscript or the other evidence in support of this theory, and having no reason to believe that Pleyel, like Simrock, intentionally falsified opus numbers, I am not willing to automatically conclude that the quartets which Pleyel published as Op.8 were composed after those known to us as Op.10.

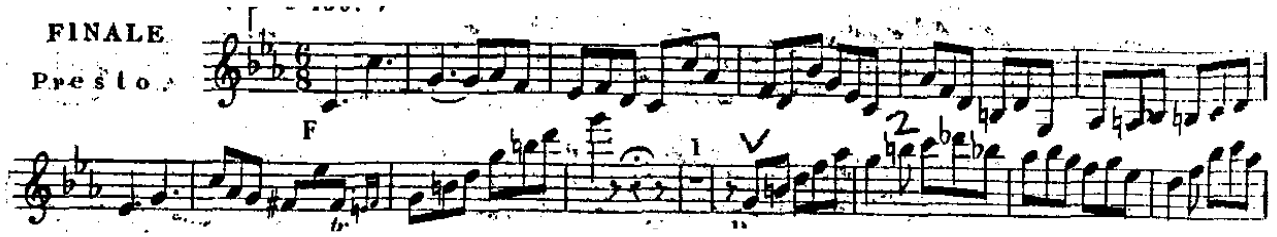
Whatever the case may be, it seems less confusing to refer to the quartets in the order they appeared throughout the 19th Century when editions of Onslow's quartets were readily available. (His quartets were published by Pleyel and Schlesinger in France, Cocks in England and by Kistner and Breitkopf & Härtel in Germany as well as several other companies over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries.)

Onslow's first 21 quartets were published in sets of three and each quartet within a set shares the same Opus number. These sets are Op.4, Op.8, Op.9, Op.10, Op.21, Op.36, and Op.46. The individual quartets are differentiated as Haydn's or Beethoven's were, e.g. Op.8 No.1, Op.8 No.2 etc. or by an actual string quartet number, such as String Quartet No.18, Op.36 No.3.

The Opus 8 quartets are dedicated to Pierre Baillot (1771-1842), one of the great French violin virtuosi then in ascendancy. The first, and perhaps the strongest of the set, **String Quartet No.4, Op.8 No.1** is in c minor. Upon hearing the first few brooding measures of the introductory *Largo*, one is immediately impressed by the advance in both ideas, emotion and tonal resources available to the composer:



In both the *Largo* and the whirling *Allegro agitato,* itself a *tour d' force*, the cello is given a very strong, in many cases, a leading but not solo role. This is an important development. Other than Mozart's *Prussian Quartets* (K.575, 589 & 590), Haydn's Op.20 No.2 and Beethoven's Op.59 Quartets, there are no comparable examples, and in truth only Beethoven's Op.59 actually bring the cello to the level of an equal voice in a non-novelty way. So, one can see the fruit of Onslow's association with Reicha had an almost immediate affect. (Remember, we know that it was Reicha who familiarized Onslow with the Op.59) The second movement, *Adagio*, begins as a dreamy pastoral song but the middle section features a stormy interlude reminescent of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. The third movement, *Minuetto Allegretto* combines a charming, Haydnesque minuet with a musette trio section. The opening theme to the 6/8 finale, *Presto*, is a downward plunging passage of considerable force:

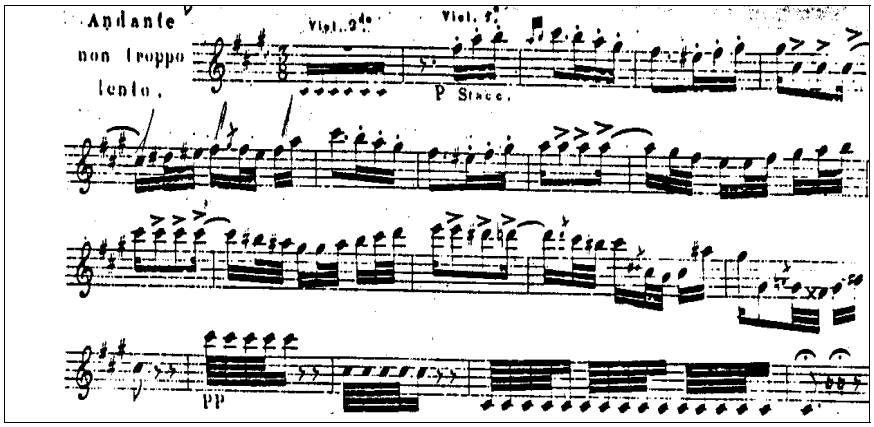


The viola then begins a fugal development of the main theme. The second theme clearly conjures up the mood of Marchand's galloping *La Chasse.* As the movement progresses, the listener is led to prepare for a rousing finish, but Onlsow surprises by racing away on tip-toe *pianissimo*. This is a first rate work which would ornament any quartet's repertoire. The sound of this quartet is very original; it does not bring to mind the music of anyone else and can be recommended to amateurs and professionals alike.

String Quartet No.5, Op.8 No.2 is in F Major. One does not hear much, if any, advance in the *Allegro con brio* over the Op.4 Quartets. The main theme is based on an interesting grace note melody. Although well-written, the first violin part dominates almost as much as one finds in Mozart's early quartets. The *Andante grazioso* is a set of variations based on a theme in d minor, which might be called a shepherd's plaint. The variations are workmanlike but unremarkable except for one tremendous variation, nearly a third of the piece, in which the first violin is given an almost virtuosic part. Next is a *Minuetto Vivace* which features a spritely dance-like subject presented in canonic fashion. Here the part writing is better. The middle section, which is quite clever, is also presented in a canonic way. The last movement, *Allegretto Scherzo,* has for its main theme a bravura melody. Once again, most of the thematic work is given to the first violin. In this quartet, one can clearly see that Onslow had his dedicatee (Baillot) in mind. The first violin part requires a facile finger hand and elegant bow style. One feels it was written for the Paris Salon Concerts of the early 19th Century. While the music is tuneful, refined, and enjoyable to play, I don't think it belongs in the concert hall. Amateurs, however, will get considerable pleasure from it as long as the first violinist is up to the challenge.

The last quartet of this set, **String Quartet No.6, Op.8 No.3** is in A Major. Its opening movement, *Allegro*, is based on a five note motif stated by the cello and first violin and then the second violin. Here, we find the part writing is better. Several emotional peaks are reached in duets between the first violin and cello. There is also an excellent second theme. Onslow cleverly ends it with a swift scale passage.

The next movement, *Andante non troppo lento,* is perhaps the most striking of the quartet. In the original manuscript, the movement is subtitled *al Hispanuola*. This was due to the fact that it is based on a popular late 18th Century Spanish dance, the *Seguidilla bolera.* This dance is generally stately in nature, of moderate tempo, in a minor key and usually in either 3/4 or 3/8 time. Onslow is able to create a very convincing effect by the use of a regular and repetitive accompanimental figure in the viola and cello set against staccato and syncopated melody in the 1st violin. (See right):



This exotic effect is further enhanced by Onslow's ability to conjure the strumming sound of a guitar, an instrument to which the *Seguidilla bolera* is usually performed. He achieves this through the use of rapid staccato notes in repetition passed from voice to voice at various points. (Note the last line of the above example). With the exception of Boccherini, who spent his life in Spain, there is little or nothing that is contemporary which compares with this marvellous movement.

In the *Minuetto Allegro*, Onslow once again reaches into his stock of tonal colors to create a 'call to the hunt,' no less effective than the third movement of Schubert's famous cello quintet, D.956. The first section begins with an unusual trumpet-like theme given to the first violin while the rest of the voices are made to sound like horns. This is very tight writing and the melody is quickly passed from voice to voice. In the excellent trio section, the first violin presents a lovely contrasting tune to a bagpipe-sounding accompaniment in the lower voices.

The finale, *Vivace*, as the title suggests, is a very spirited affair. It is a rondo in 2/4 which stylistically, but not tonally, clearly shows the influence of Beethoven's Op.18 Quartets. The interesting second theme, composed of triplets, takes both player and listener alike by surprise. A fugal episode is suddenly introduced as the means of leading to an exciting conclusion. This work, in my opinion, is nearly as strong as Op.8 No.1 and can be recommended to both professional and amateur alike.

In considering this set of quartets as a whole, what is asounding is that, given the time period of their composition (1809-14), there is really nothing which sounds comparable melodically. Onslow's passion for opera and flair for the dramatic allowed him to serve as a trail-blazer of Romantic melodic writing, not just during this period, but throughout his fruitful career. This fusion of chamber music form with the operatic is essentially unique to Onslow and is rarely, if ever, duplicated in the works of other composers so sucessfully and harmoniously

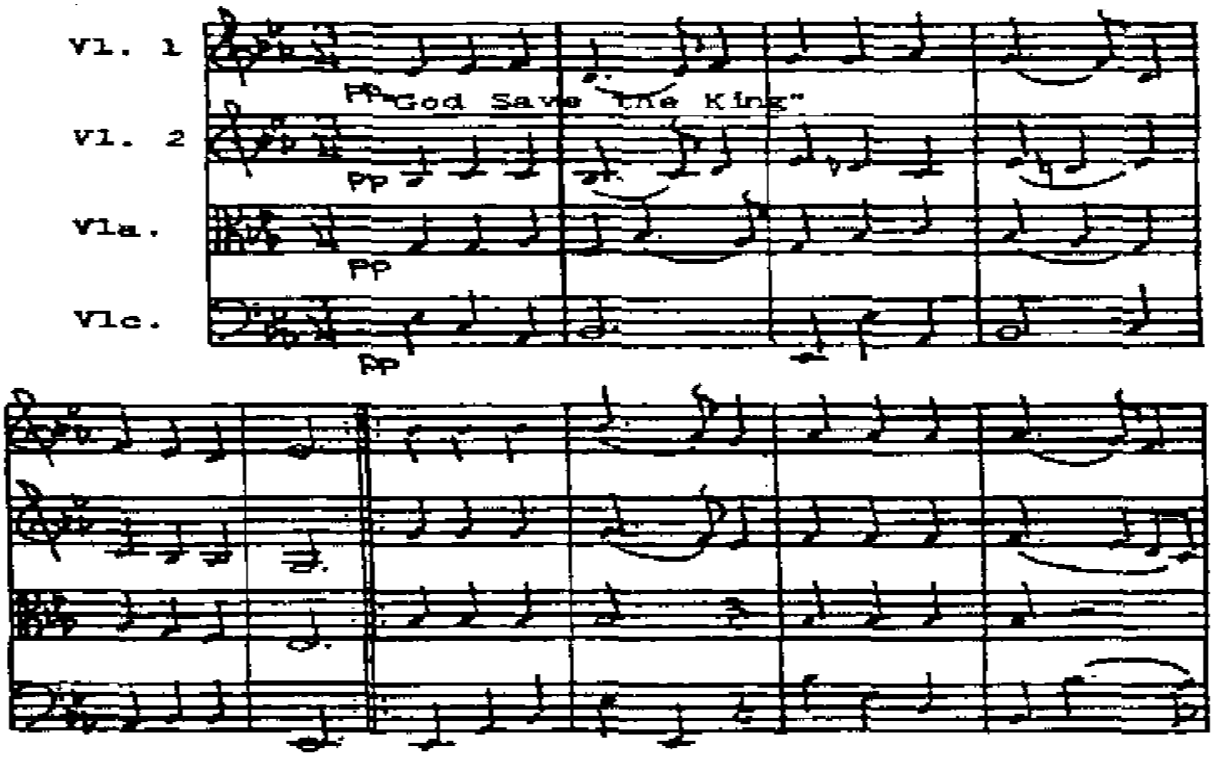
Readers will recall that Onslow's first three quartets were composed in 1806-7 before he had the benefit of any formal composition lessons. After studying with Antonin Reicha, he did not, with the exception of a few slight piano works, begin to compose again for nearly five years. Finally in 1813, he once more set about writing string quartets. Whether he wrote Op.10 Nos.1-3 (generally referred to as Qt. Nos.10-12) before Op.8 Nos.1-3 (i.e. Qt. Nos. 4-6) is the subject of some debate, but for all practical purposes, it is probably not of great significance considering the fact that the Op.10 and Op.8 quartets were separated by less than two years. Additionally, one cannot, from the writing itself, glean any great advance in one set over the other. Further, Onslow himself made sure that these quartets were published almost immediately after completion and had nearly 40 years to correct any mistake had he chosen to do so. In any event, there is no debate that the second set of quartets Onslow wrote after his lessons with Reicha was the Op.9 Nos.1-3 (i.e. Qt. Nos.7-9). These are sometimes referred to as the 'Lord Onslow Quartets' in recognition of the fact that the dedicatee was the composer's recently deceased grandfather, after whom he was named. As noted earlier, Lord George had stood by his his son Edward (the composer's father) after his flight from England and had continued to support him financially throughout the difficult period of the French Revolution, finally settling a large sum of money on Edward so that he could marry and raise a family. There is considerable evidence that the composer was quite fond of his grandfather and that this

Lord George Onslow (1731-1814)

affection was reciprocated. There had been several extended visits by George to England and by Lord George to France beginning when George was barely five right up until his grandfather's death in 1814, despite the fact that the two countries had been at war off and on since 1789.

The Op.9 quartets were begun immediately after Onslow had received the news of his grandfather's death. **Op.9 No.1 in g minor, Quartet No.7**, subtitled *God Save the King*, opens with an explosive *Allegro*, the first theme of which begins with rising eights in the cello followed by falling eights in the first violin. The second theme is based upon an ever ascending triplet rhythm. Though explosive, it is not particularly stormy. And despite the key signature, it does not really sound like music written in a minor key.

It is the second movement, *Andante,* a theme and set of four variations on the national anthem of his grandfather from which the Quartet takes its name. Onslow could quote the English national anthem without fear of censorship given the fact that in 1814, Napoleon had just been defeated by the Allies, the most prominent of which were the English through whose efforts the Bourbons were returning to France from England. There can be little question that Onslow took the second movement of Haydn's *Kaiserquartett*, Op.76 No.3, a similar set of variations on the then Austrian national anthem (*Gott erhalte den Kaiser* and since 1919 generally known as Deutschland über Alles, the national anthem of Germany*),* as his model. This movement is astounding and in everyway equal, if not actually superior, to Haydn's, right down to the emotionally somber and organ-like setting of the theme: (see below)



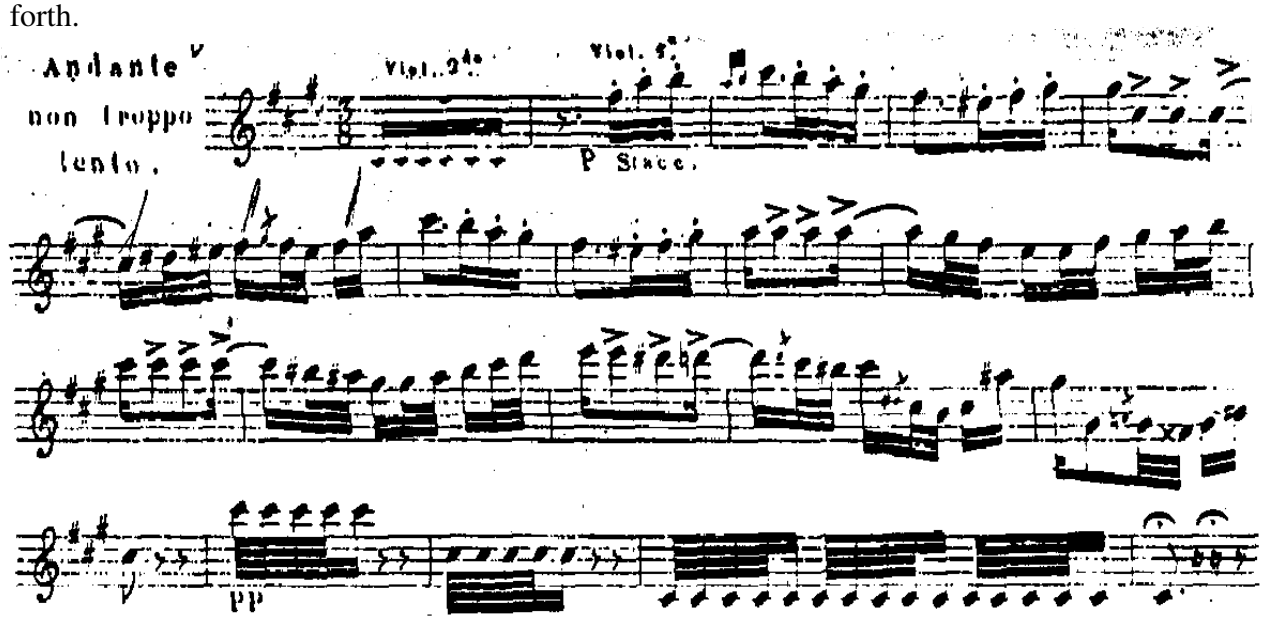
In the first variation, the theme is given to the lower three voices while the first violin delicately weaves a silken web high above. In the second variation, the viola and cello belt out the theme against the showily virtuosic rapid-fire 64ths in the first violin. The next variation slices the theme into sets of four slurred eights. Each voice is give a section of the theme to complete. The last and most masterful variation begins with a fugue that has some very advanced tonalities for the year 1814. This fugue begins *pp* but gradually rises to a crescendo of emotion before quietly breaking apart into a bridge section which returns to a powerful restatement of the theme.

The third movement is a brilliantly haunting syncopated *Menuetto* in g minor, played in one. The contrasting trio, in major, is played at least as fast as the menuetto, if not faster. The finale, *Agitato,* begins with an off-beat drum-like snarl, complete with slinkily downward plunging chromatic passages and sudden and unanticipated accents. The part writing is superb throughout. This quartet should not be missed by either amateur or professional; it certainly belongs in the repertoire and in the concert hall, and stands in stark contrast to anything being composed at this time. Without doubt, a masterpiece of its kind.

The *Allegro vivace assai* to **Op. 9 No.2 in a minor, Quartet No.8** begins with a syncopated solo in the second violin. After two measures, the cello enters with a slowly rising, then falling chromatic theme in its lowest register. The music then takes off in a great rush, virtually tripping over itself with off-beat accents. This is vintage Onslow from his early period. It leaves nothing to be desired!

A *Minuetto presto* is placed second. Though in 3/4, it features a canonic theme beginning on beat 2 but giving the feeling that it is beat one. The music which moves along at quite a clip (its marked 108 to the dotted half note) does not really have a contrasting trio but the listener is hardly aware of this.

An *Andante non troppo lento* comes next. In 6/8 and c minor, a doleful French folksong breaks forth.

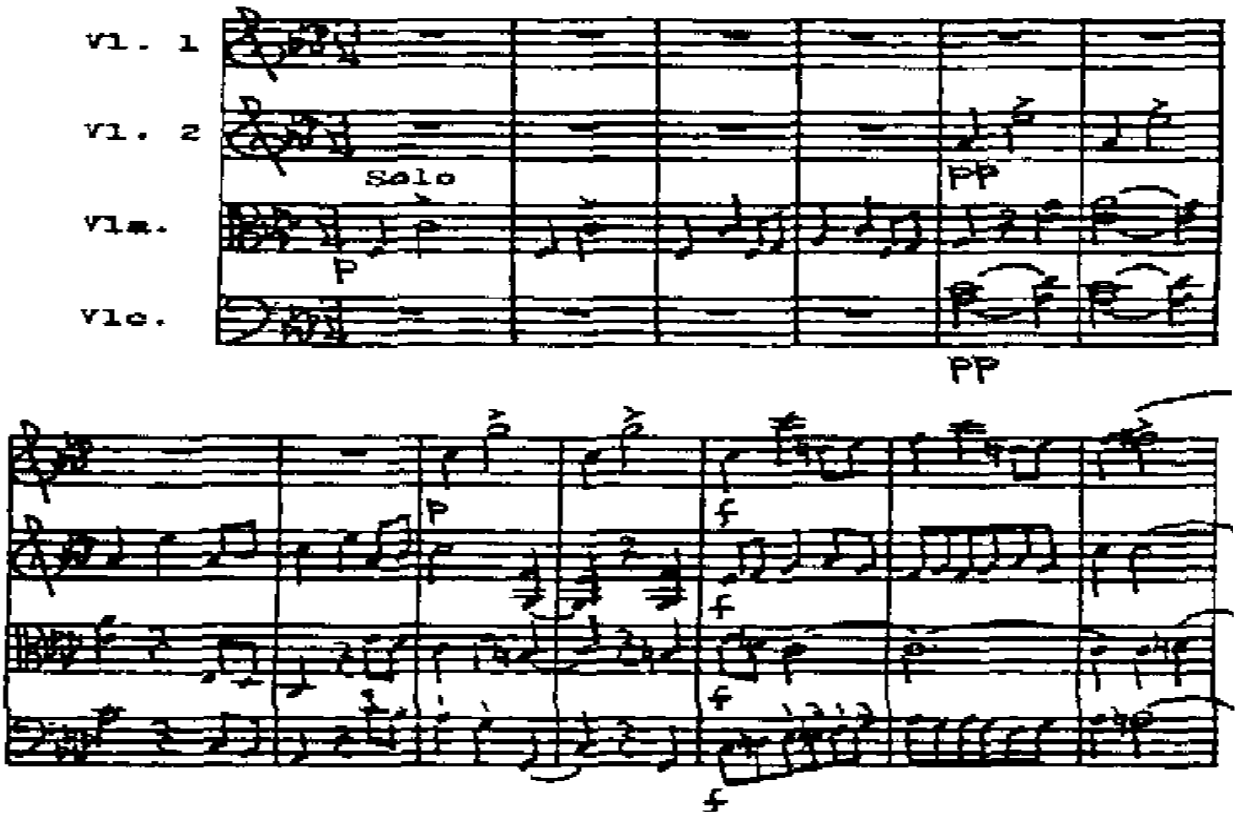


Several powerfully poignant duets between the first violin and cello follow before the fetchingly chromatic denouement.

The finale, *Scherzo, Allegro*, though certainly effective, strangely enough, might have made a better first movement and the first movement a better finale. The first violin part is pretty demanding and has too much of the thematic material for my taste. Though not as strong as Op.9 No.1, this quartet should be of interest to both amateur and professional alike.

The third quartet of this set, **Op.9 No.3 in f minor, Quartet No.9,** begins with a melodramatic *Moderato* which immediately reminds one of Mendelssohn (who was five at the time this music was composed). The second theme is pure Onslow. While the first violin is often more than *primus inter pares*, it is not a soloist and one is, in any event, unaware of this disparity.

The second movement is a haunting *Menuetto*. The opening theme introduced by the solo viola and quickly taken up by the others (see example below) is clearly a hunt motif. It is the sound of horns in the distance.



Dr. Franks believed that it was meant to recall the many fox hunts Onslow had enjoyed on his grandfather's estates in England during his youth. The charming elf-like and very effective trio section again should be played quicker than the minuet itself. For its sort, you simply will not find anything better.

This is followed by an *Andante*, a theme introduced by the cello and set of lovely variations. The finale is a veritable powerhouse, taking the listener's breath away from the very first

measure and never letting go! Again, another masterpiece. Originally published by Pleyel, the Lord Onslow Quartets remained popular throughout the 19th century being republished by Kistner (& edited by Jockisch) as late as 1904. Recordings of Op.9 Nos. 1 & 3 are available on a CPO CD 999 060.

The next set of quartets is a set of three generally known as Op.10 and numbered as String Quartets 10, 11 & 12. I write 'generally' because some Onslow authorities believe that these quartets were actually composed before those known to us as Op.8. As discussed earlier, this is by no means certain. The main thing is that the nine quartets written between 1813—1816, i.e. Op.8 (Quartet Nos.4-6) Op.9 (Quartet Nos.7-9) and Op.10 (Quartet Nos.10-12) were composed within a short time of each other and one cannot, from the writing itself glean any significant advance in one set over another. This being the case, there seems little to gain by renumbering the quartets with numbers by which they were never known. Even the date of publication of the Op.10 Quartets has never been precisely established. Pleyel and Steiner, Onslow's chief publishers during his lifetime, brought them out sometime during 1815—1816. It is known that the Op.9 Quartets, (Quartet Nos.7-9), were begun in 1814 immediately after the death of the composer's grandfather Lord George Onslow. Therefore it seems likely that the Op.10 quartets were composed in 1815.

There is not a great deal of information about Onlsow's life at the time these quartets were composed. What little there is has already been discussed, however, it should be noted that by the time Onslow began the Op.8 quartets (sometime in 1813), he had achieved some small degree of recognition in that his name had merited an entry in the *Dictionnaire historique des musiciens* which was published at the end of 1811. It is worth reprinting part of that entry not only because it gives us some idea of the first description the public had of Onslow but also because it is at odds with with some suspect information which probably damaged Onslow's reputation after his death.

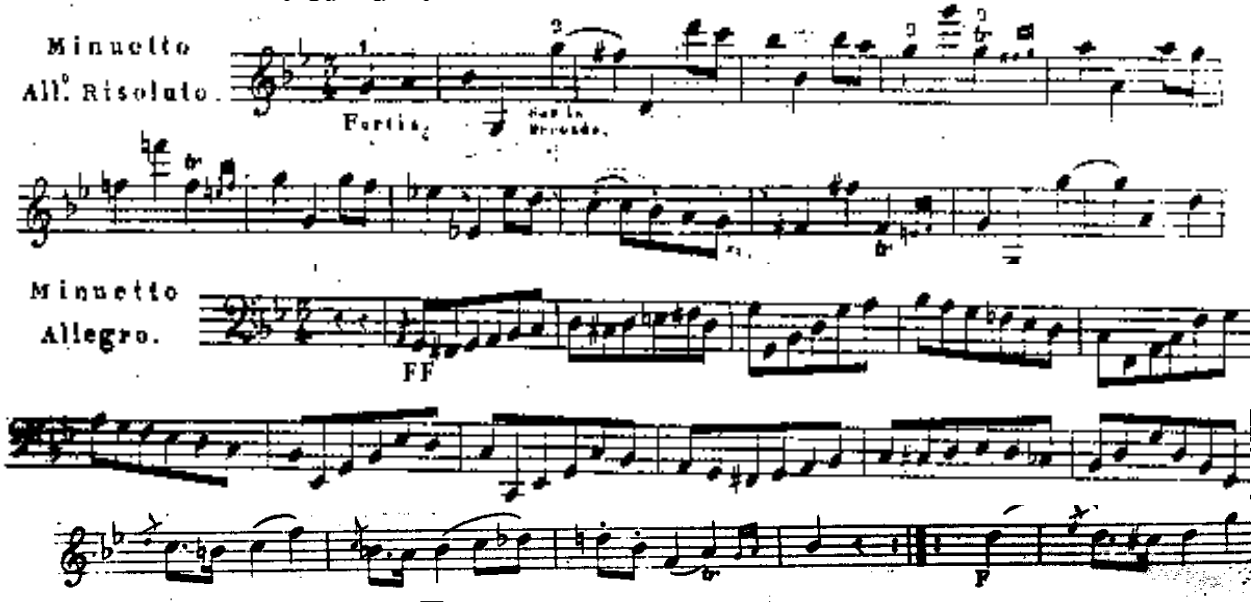
> "George Onslow born of English parents *(sic—only George's father was English)* at Clermont, Département de Puy-du-Dôme, has come to enjoy a good success with only the most basic study of music and has ended up giving himself almost entirely over to it. The piano is the instrument which he has cultivated the most...After studying composition in London under Monsieur Cramer, he realized music should be his main occupation..."

Unknown today, although he still rates over a page in the *New Grove's*, John Cramer (1771-1858) was, during his life-time, a highly respected pianist and composer. His music was both known and appreciated by Haydn and Beethoven with whom he was on friendly terms. That Cramer's influence had been decisive in Onslow's opting for a career as a composer would have struck no one as unusual. Surprisingly, this information never appeared again in any other biographical sketch of Onslow. Instead, subsequently, it was repeated *ad nauseam* that upon hearing the opera *Stratonice* by the French composer Etienne Méhul, Onslow was moved to take up music as a career. The fact that *Stratonice* was, by the time of Onslow's death (1853), regarded as a second or even third rate opera, did little to enhance his reputation in the eyes of posterity.

The Op.10 Quartets were dedicated to a prominent lawyer and amateur musician, J.M. Claudius Lurin. He was a close family friend who had first met Edward Onslow, George's father, during the French Revolution. One interesting feature of each of the three quartets in this set is that they all have, in the minuet or trio to the minuet section, a dance from Onslow's native province of Auvergne. Onslow makes sure the player will not miss this fact and clearly labels each of these peasant tunes "*Air de danse des Montagnes d'Auvergne."* Onslow's biographer, Dr. Richard Franks, sees this as evidence of Reicha's influence, the latter being quite keen about reviving national songs and local folk idioms.

The *Allegro spirituoso* to **Op.10 No.1, String Quartet No.10 in G** begins with a syncopated 'herky-jerky' dialog between the first violin and cello which sounds almost as if it were begun in mid-phase. The writing clearly shows the influence of Beethoven's Op.18 Quartets. In particular, there is a certain similiarity in feeling about this movement and the first movement of Op.18 No.5. The type of operatic drama and chromaticism which propels the Op.8 and Op.9 Quartets is entirely missing here. The themes seem to rely less on melody than on rhythm for their force. The writing is very different from his earlier quartets, but nonetheless quite powerful and full of forward motion. The very fine *Adagio* which comes next is based on a simple three note motif. The naturalness and ease with which Onslow develops this simplest of themes into a set of elaborate variations is astonishing. This movement is certainly an illustration of the high degree of competence that Onslow had achieved in such a short period of time.

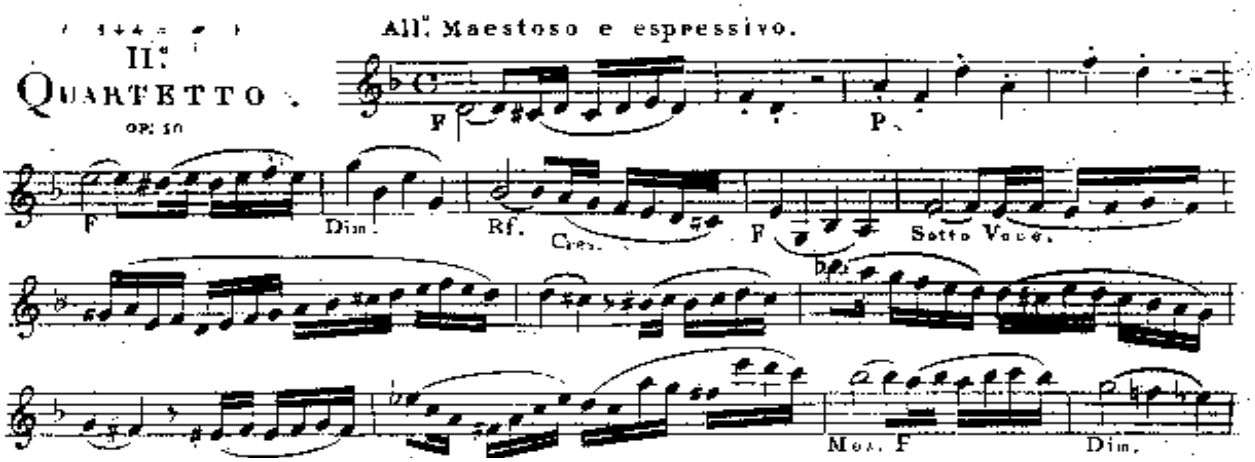
Those who have played or heard the earlier minuets and scherzi to the first nine quartets will be struck, once again, with how different sounding this *Mineutto Allegro Risoluto* is. Risoluto is the key word here; this is not so much a dance as a military parade march. The violins pound out an unrelenting three-step against heavy running eights in the lower voices.



In the finale, *Allegretto con moto*, snippets of the theme are tossed about from voice in a kind moto-perpetuo atmosphere. This is a very ingenious composition. The part-writing throughout is excellent and the quartet is first rate. Another masterwork which belongs in the concert hall.

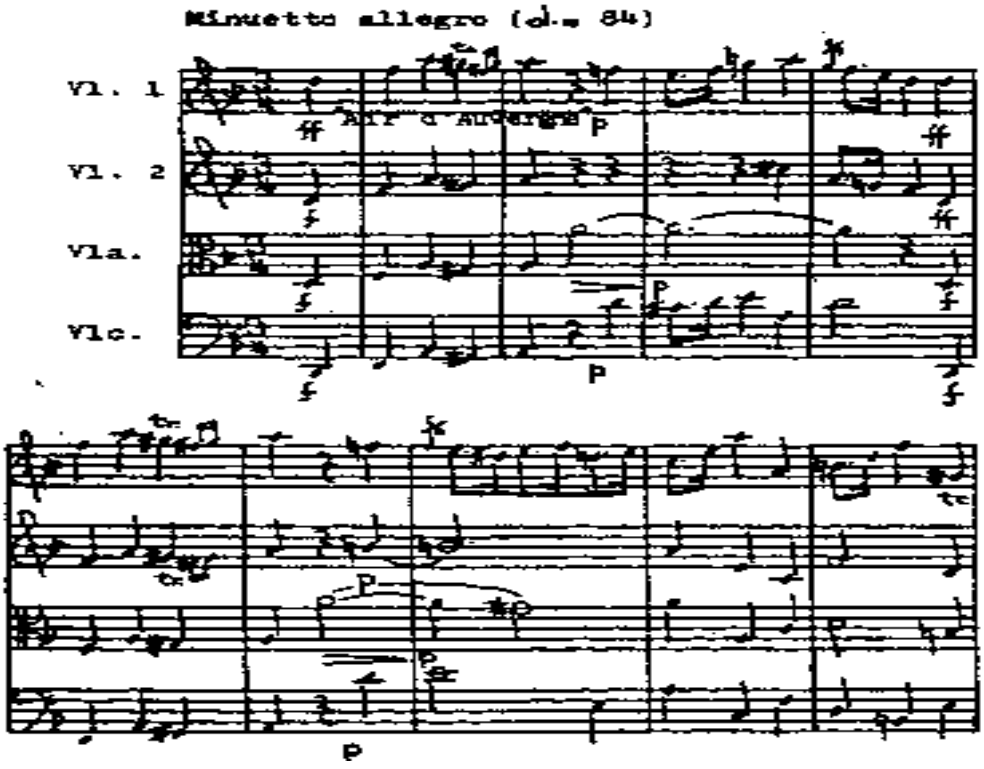
The Quartet was recorded in 1979 by the Trio a Cordes Francais with Yvon Caracilly on CCV LP #1002 and re-released on Koch CD#3-1623-2. (It is listed as Op.8 No.1 and not Op.10 No.1)

In **String Quartet No.11, Op.10 No.2 in G,** we are back on familiar territory with the Onslow we know and have heard before. The opening movement, *Allegro Maestoso e expressivo,* begins with a very dramatic violin solo over the pulsing 8ths of the three other voices:



As the movement proceeds, the other voices join in but the thematic material, for the most part, remains with the first violin.

In Op.10 No.1 and Op.10 No.3 Onslow places the minuet in its traditional position as the third movement and the *Air de Danse des Montagnes d'Auvergne* appears within the trio section to minuet. But here, the minuet is placed second and the Auvergne air is placed not in the trio but the minuet itself. These Airs from the mountains of Auvergne clearly are robust and quick dances. Onslow gives each of the voices a hand in presenting the theme which is embelished with a several trills. (see above example) The dance, in a minor, is followed by a more gentle trio in D Major.

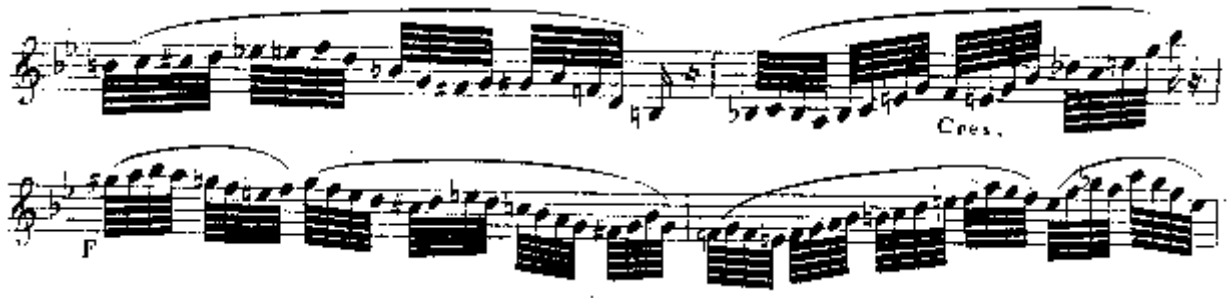


The following *Andante con variazione* is based on a sweet theme and by a set of four very substantial variations. The first variation is a dialog between the all four voices. The language of the dialog is expressed by long upward and downward 32nd note chromatic passages. The short second variation is uncomplicated and re-states the theme, this time in the relative minor. The third variation, now back in major, consists of a virtuosic challenge for the first violin who is given 32nd note triplets to the mild accompaniment of the others. The fourth and final variation makes considerable use of elaborate syncopated cross rhythms. Clearly the center of gravity of the Quartet, this is a marvelous movement.

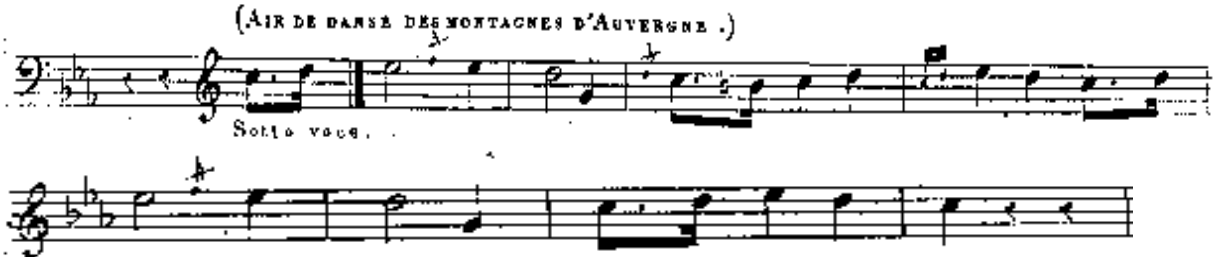
The finale, *Allegretto* in 6/8, is a genial and carefree romp with neither great speed nor urgency. The middle section features a brief but interesting exchange of the second theme between the first violin and the cello. This is a nice quartet, but suffers by comparision when following on the heels of the extraordinary Op.10 No.1. If there is a weakness, it might be that a little too much of the thematic material is given over to the first violin.

The last quartet of this set, **Op.10 No.3 in Eb Major, String Quartet No.12,** opens with a subdued, but not tragic-sounding, 14 measure introductory *Largo*. The theme to the *Largo* is immediately restated in the following *Allegro con brio,* first by the cello, then the viola followed by the second violin and lastly by the first violin in what might be called a 'mock fugal style.' But despite the staggered restatement of theme, a full-blown fugue does not actually develop. Unfortunately, the part-writing here is not all that could be desired as the first violin clearly dominates proceedings in an otherwise exciting movement.

The cello and 1st violin take the lead in the *Andantino sostenuto* which is only andantino (and not adagio) because of the sheer amount of 32nd and 64th note passages. The movement features tremendously dramatic chromatic runs in both the soprano and bass lines:

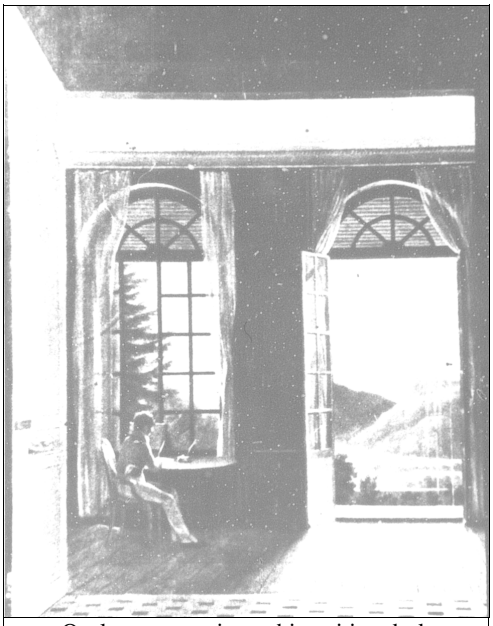


This type of passage work, which almost always achieves a very good effect, can be found again and again in the slow movements to Onslow's quartets. In the trio to the succeeding *Minuetto allegro*, Onslow achieves a striking result by allowing the cello to sing the Auvergne air in its tenor (notated in treble) register. (see below)



In the finale, *Allegro vivace*, with its brilliant first violin part, Onslow comes up with an exciting denouement to top off this very good string quartet. Of the set, amateurs, especially if their first violinist is strong, will enjoy all three; and certainly the 1st and probably the 3rd deserve to be heard on stage and should be tried by professionals.

Life at the end of the Empire was for the French Onslows much the same as it was for any Frenchman: difficult and filled with deprivations. George's father, Edward, suffered from serious mental illness, and George was given power of attorney over family affairs. During this time, it was only through massive financial gifts from George's grandfather, Lord George Onslow, that the French Onslows were saved from losing their properties. During the Restoration, the Onslow family's situation improved as workers became more readily available to do farm work and money was to be made from the harvest of their estate. However, even during this time, because of the heavy indemnity imposed on the French by the victors, Onslow's financial situation was precarious and the French Onslows remained dependent upon the gifts of their English cousins to help them pay the high taxes levied by the Royalist government. George himself expected, perhaps unrealistically, that because he came from a family known for its royal service both in England and in France, that he would be in line for some lucrative government position. Despite dedicating one of his compositions to the new king, nothing ever came of such expectations.



Onslow composing at his writing desk
In the central salon at Chateau de Chalendras

With the return of political and economic stability in France, Onslow, it appears from his correspondence, began to spend as much time at his writing desk composing as he did overseeing various aspects of his father's estates. Keen to establish his reputation, during the first decade of the Restoration, Onslow produced a steady stream of works including some nine string quartets, three string quintets, seven piano trios, three works for piano alone, four sonatas or duos for piano and violin and one opera.

Virtually all of his compositions during this time were published immediately and were given extensive reviews both in France and abroad. After finishing the Op.9 and Op.10 string quartets (Nos.6-12) in 1815, he did not return to the genre for seven years. In 1816-17, Onslow completed three Grand Duos for piano and violin (Op.11) and two sets of variations for piano. (Op.12 & 13). The duos were dedicated to John Cramer, one of his teachers and it is believed that he gave Cramer the autographed copies in 1818 during a visit to England. The piano pieces appear to have been dedicated to Louis XVIII and commemorated his return to France and, as previously mentioned, so dedicated in hopes of his getting some Royal appointment.

In the little which, heretofore, has been known about Onslow, the picture which emerged was of a happy child of fortune, wealthy, a man who could quickly pen and have his compositions

published—someone to whom it all came easily. But this is, in part, a misleading picture. Sometime before his 1818 trip to England, but after the completion of the variations, Onslow appears to have fallen into a period of depression believing that his muse had deserted him. Writing to his family he noted:

> "*You will receive...the variations that you have requested and which have made me say many times, as did Haydn (I am not attempting to compare myself to him in this matter):* ***my creative force is gone****! I have so lost the habit of working that my ideas have become entirely paralysed*."

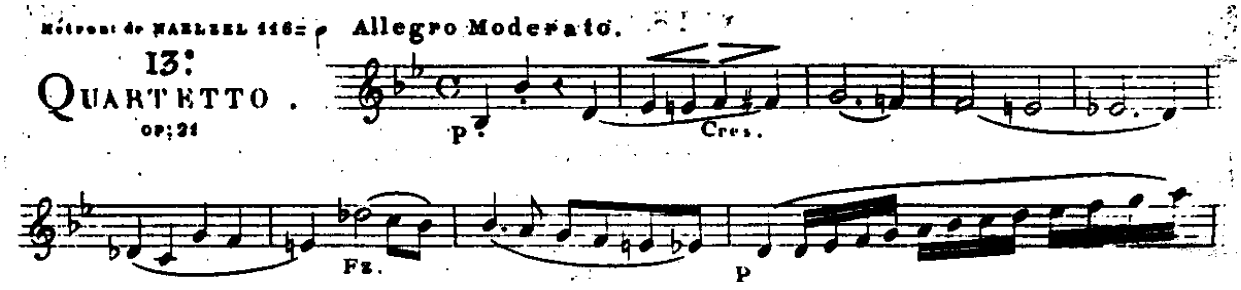
After his return from England, in another interesting letter, he deplores the fact that so many prominent French composers of his time were turning their backs on chamber music and pandering to the masses writing bombastic pieces. In a letter to an acquaintance he writes:

> "*Some composers of first rank wish to perpetuate their reputation through the most imposing pieces, disdaining what the Italians call* ***Musica da camera*** *& abandoning, for that false cause, the admirable heritage of Haydn and Mozart*."

His despondence over the music scene and his desire to make his mark lasted several years and eventually led to his composing for the *Opéra Comique*. Ultimately, his own turning away from chamber music was temporary. In the middle of 1818 he composed another set of three piano trios, Op.14, which were later to become his String Quartet Nos.16-18. This set of trios met with tremendous acclaim in Germany and were praised as being "of an excellence equal to the most beautiful...of the masters." In 1819, Onslow composed a set of three sonatas for violin, Op.15, and a book of cello sonatas Op.16, a viola version was also authorized by Onslow in the interests of greater sales. This was followed up by three quintets (Nos.4-6) for two violins, viola and two cellos, Opp.17-19. The publication of these works established Onslow's reputation in Germany as a chamber music composer of the first rank. A review of these quintets shortly after they were published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* praised them for their originality and inspiration and stated:

> "*Nowadays we name with esteem as worthy representatives of chamber music Beethoven, Spohr, the Rombergs, Ries and Onslow...*"

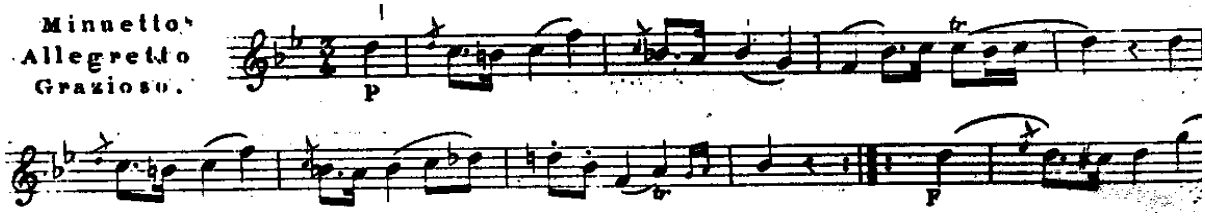
In the summer of 1822, Onslow completed his seventh piano trio, Op.20 and the three quartets of Op.21 (Quartet Nos.13-15) which were published later that fall. The quartets were dedicated to a Monsieur Ardisson, thought to be a violinist of English extraction residing in Paris at that time. The first of the set, **No.13, Op.21 No.1 in B flat** opens with an interesting chromatic introduction which is played in unison by all four voices:



The first violin then takes off into an exhilerating but almost concerto-like episode of considerable length. A captivating second theme, which is split between the first violin and

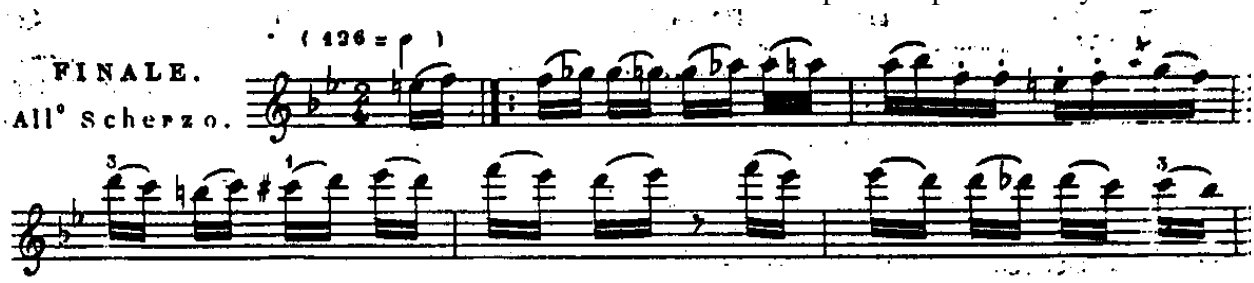
cello, leads back to the original subject. The movement is closed by the reappearance of the second theme. Though quite effective, and certainly not yet like one of Spohr's Quatour Brillants, nonetheless there is rather too much first violin for my taste here.

Onslow follows this up with a very graceful and almost classical *Menuetto Allegretto* rather than a slow movement.



Particularly memorable, however, is the operatically dramatic trio in b flat minor during which, to the tremulos in the middle voices, the first violin and cello alternately wail and belt out the plaintive theme, first in the soprano and then in the bass register. The contrast between the minuet and trio could not be greater. Onslow was to use this device again and again in later quarterts always with telling effect and great success. In the *Adagio cantabile* which follows, Onslow produces an aria of delicate flower-like beauty. Though mostly in the first violin, the second has some very important supporting material and cello is given a chance to sing in its tenor register in the middle and at the end of the movement.

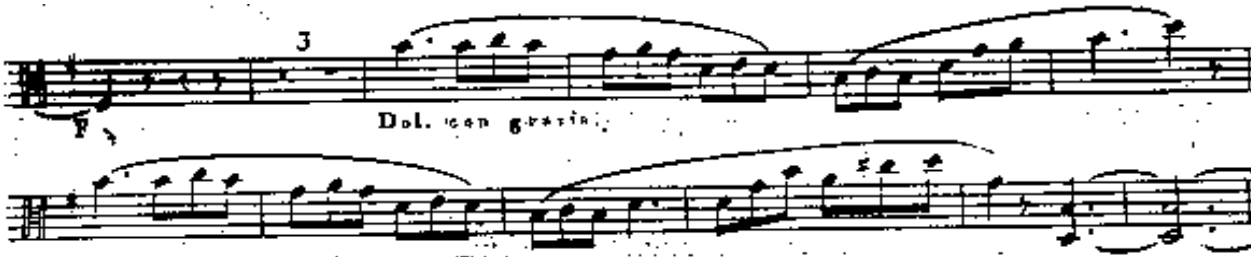
In the superb finale, *Allegro scherzo*, Onslow uses an ingenius but tricky rhythmic figure for his first theme which is tossed from voice to voice and needs to be picked up seamlessly:



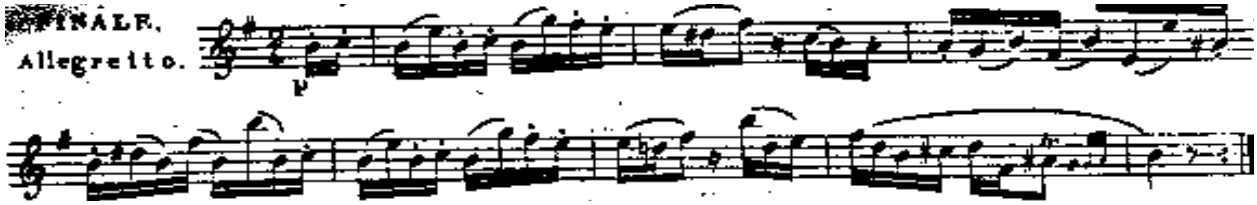
This movement requires tremendous ensemble playing to sound effective. Overall, Op.21 No.1 is a good work with wonderful melodies and other original effects. Its one weakness is the uneveness of the part-writing, especially in the first and third movements.

In **Quartet No.14, Op.21 No.2 in e minor** this part-writing problem disappears and each of the instruments plays a considerble role in the introduction and development of the melodic material. Again, as in the prior quartet, Onslow opens with the cello playing a chromatic run, but this time it is downward plunging.

Although in minor, the movement does not sound tragic but is full of restless excitement. A hunt-like second theme is introduced by the first violin and then restated by the viola:

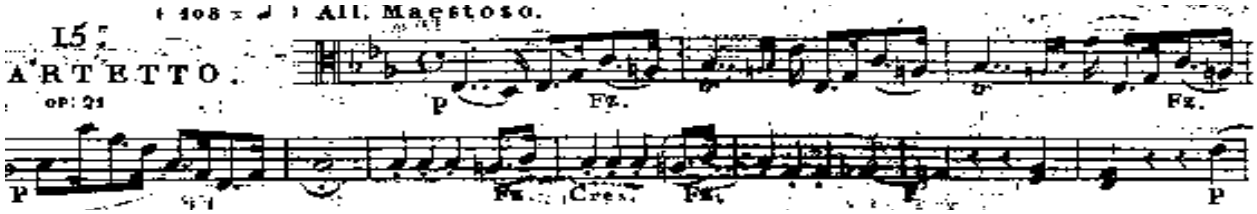


Onslow ends this fast-moving, satisfying movement by finally providing the answering phrase to the opening downward chromatic passage. He follows this up with a pleasant *Andante grazioso*. One often finds a contrasting turbulent middle section in Onslow's slow movements, but not here. The almost pastoral mood is not disturbed from start to finish. Again the part-writing is quite good. The following *Minuetto Allegro* is in reality a stormy, quick scherzo in e minor. In the short trio in E major, the chords of the three lower parts are made to sound like a bagpipe accompaniment to a cheerful country dance played by the first violin. The finale, *Allegretto*, begins with a jaunty theme (see below) which is given a military flavor by the percussive accompaniment beat out against it, snare drum-like, by the other voices.

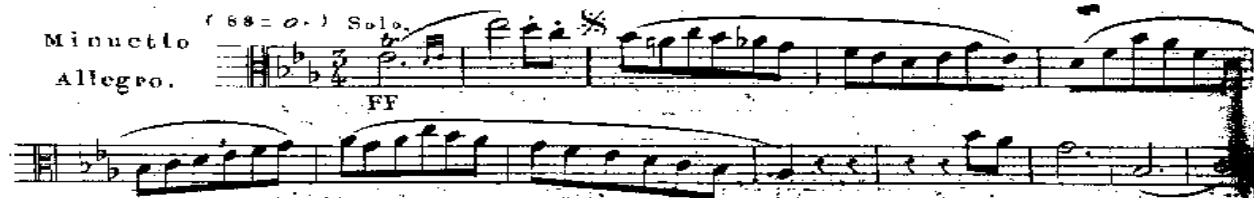


There is a tendency to begin this movement too quickly and players who do so come to grief by the time they hit the middle of the movement as Onslow switches from 8ths and 16ths to 16ths and 32nds. Again, each of the voices plays a considerable role in this very fine movement. This is a first rate quartet which derserves to be heard in the concert hall. It is of medium difficulty and should pose no problems to experienced players.

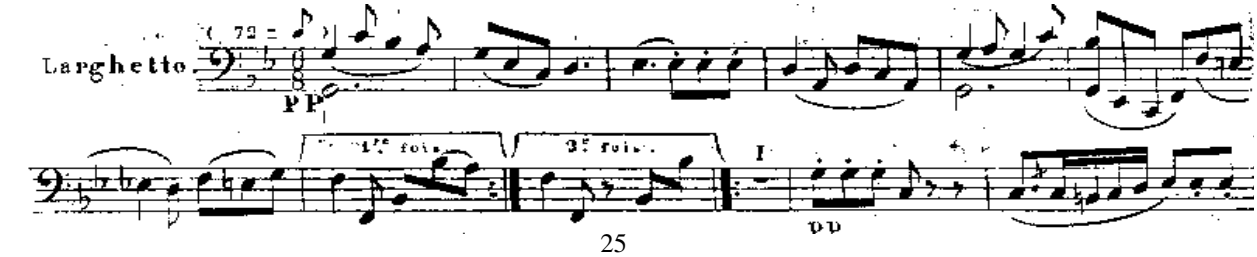
The last quartet of this set, **No.15, Op.21 No.3 in B flat**, opens in quite a striking fashion, *Allegro Maestoso*, with the two lower voices presenting a theme of operatic drama:



The theme is then picked up by the two violins and shortly after takes on a heroic or miliary element created by the drumming of repeated quarter notes in the lower voices. Onslow surprises by ending the movement *pp* after building to climatic FF. Again a *Minuetto* (Allegro) is placed second rather than a slower movement. The attractive opening theme is given to the viola as a solo:

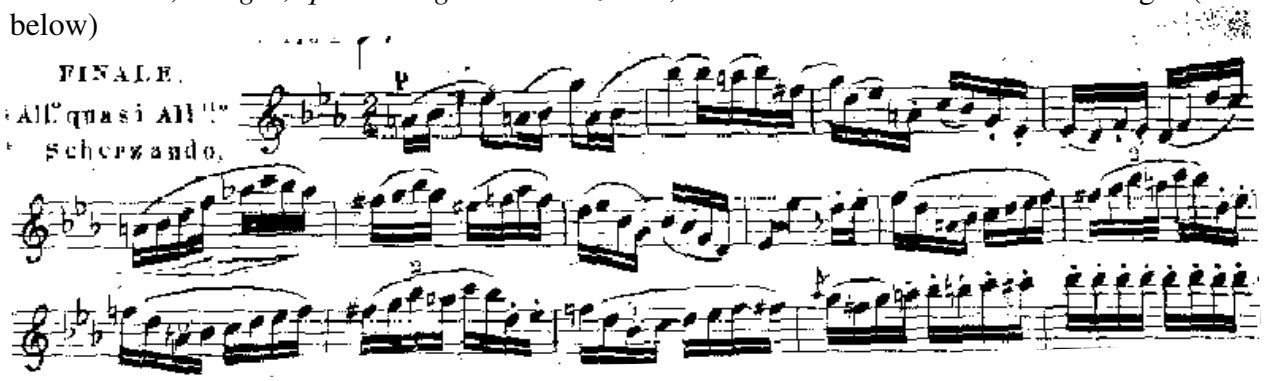


The trio is a serenade based on a Ländler or Danse type theme. The masterly *Larghetto* in g minor is reminescent of a Shepherd's Lament. The main theme is introduced by the cello:



All of the voices then participate in the development. The middle section in G major features a lovely interplay between the first violin and the cello in its upper registers. Absolutely first rate.

In the finale, *Allegro, quasi Allegretto scherzando*, the violin takes off in a hurried flight (see below)



and is virtually given no rest whatsoever, even when the others join in on the way to a suprise finish. This, too, is fine quartet worthy of performance and not beyond by good amateurs.

From the time Onslow completed his Op. 21 Quartets (1822), nearly eight years were to pass before he returned again to this genre. In the interim, he became occupied with the prospect of enhancing his reputation among his native countrymen and Parisians in particular. Strange to relate, but by 1824, he was already better known in Germany, Austria and England than in his native France. He could not help but notice that in Paris, composers who were regarded as being in the first rank (men such as Auber, Bofeldier and Hérold) were composers for the opera. This conclusion was further strengthened after many of his friends suggested to him that the reason he was not better known by the Parisian public was because he had limited himself to composing instrumental music. They urged him to apply his talents 'to the stage.'

Thus it was that in 1824 Onslow composed his first opera, *L'Alcade de la Véga*. It was in 3 acts and written for the Théàtre Royal de l'Opéra-Comique. It was not a success. According the critics, it was not the music but the poor choice of libretto which was not suited to comedy. The overture to the opera, however, became quite popular, taking on a life of its own with frequent performances in Vienna, Leipzig and other German cities. Although the opera was not a great success, it nonetheless did not harm his name within Parisian cultural circles. Meanwhile, Onslow's reputation within the Auvergne was growing. He was elected a member of the Académie de Clermont, an ancient literary and cultural association composed of the 30 most prominent writers, musicians and artists of the department of Clermont-Ferrand.

After the opera, Onslow returned to composing chamber music and toward the end of 1824 wrote another three string quintets, Nos.7-9. These were followed up by two more piano trios, Nos.8-9, Opp.26 & 27, and set of variations for piano entitled *Thême Anglais*, Op.28. Not long after this came a sonata for violin and piano, Op.29. All of these works were printed by Pleyel in France and Breitkopf & Härtel in Germany almost immediately after their composition. Additionally, the piano trios were printed in England by two firms, Boosey and Novello.

Onslow's next work struck out in a new direction—it was a sextet for piano, flute, clarinet, bassoon, French Horn and Double Bass, Op.30 in E flat. There are several possible explanations

for his sudden interest in woodwind chamber music. Reicha, who played a rather important role in the development of the woodwind quintet, was Onslow's only teacher. Still, this did not explain why Onslow waited 20 years from his last lesson with Reicha to write such a work. Two other factors provide better explanations. Woodwind music had become extremely fashionable in France during the first part of the 19th Century and Onslow, after the failure of his opera and his attempt to raise his reputation yet higher, looked for another vehicle to accomplish this same goal. The actual inspiration was probably Johann Hummel's famous Septet, Op.74 for piano, flute, oboe, horn viola, cello and bass. In fact, Onslow's Sextet is dedicated to Hummel. The Sextet was received with great critical acclaim and was quite popular, especially in Austria and Germany.

The Sextet was followed by several songs for voice and piano. In 1826, he began work on his second opera, *Colporteur ou l'Enfant du Bûcheron,* which was written for the Opera Comique. *Colporteur* premiered at the end of 1827 and was a success. The critics spoke of it in the highest terms and Onslow must surely have been gratified. By 1831, the opera had been performed in Belgium, throughout Germany and Austria, and also in Denmark and England. The overture to the opera remained in the orchestral repertoire throughout the 19th Century.

After the opera came a sonata for violin and piano, Op.31 and his 10th String Quintet for 2 cellos, Op.32. At the first performance of this quintet (in London), the second cellist failed to appear. Finally, Onslow leapt onto the stage and took the second cellist's part. Dragonetti was also in the audience and when one of the other performers asked Onslow if he did not wish the famous Italian to execute the part on the bass. Onslow is said to have replied:

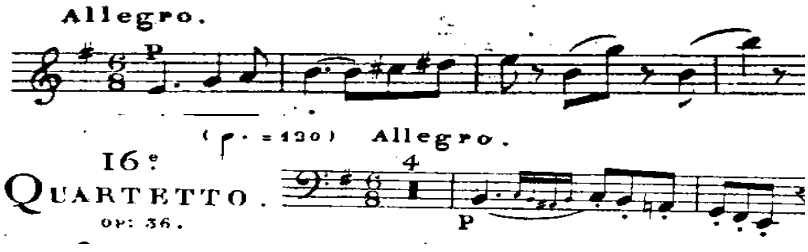
> *No! No!! A hundred times no! My 10th Quintet is being performed for the first time, and, notwithstanding all the talent which I recognize in Signor Dragonetti, I am sure the contrabass will have a detestable effect. It will howl in the middle of the other instruments; and how will he be able to soften its formidable sound?*

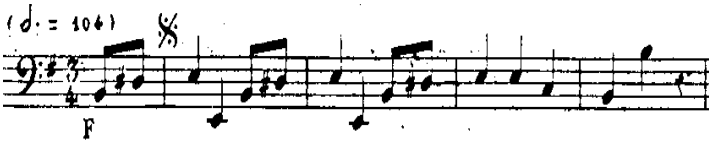
.
The Quintet which opens with a passage in the second cello for some reason gave Onslow difficulty and finally, he agreed to allow Dragonetti to play it. After the first 8 measures, the audience, including Onslow, sprang to its feet and burst into applause. Based on the performance, Onslow decided to make a bass part for all of his quintets for two cellos. Three more quintets, Opp.33,34 & 35, were composed in 1828.

Finally, in 1829, Onslow returned to the genre of the string quartet, finishing his Op.36, a set of three. Given the superb quality of these works, it is surprising to learn they were transcriptions of his Op.14 piano trios. Onslow's American biographer, Dr. Franks, states that the composer left the violin and cello parts to the trio alone and gave the majority, but not all, of the keyboard melody to the inner voices, the second violin and viola. The quartets were published by Pleyel and Breitkopf and Härtel in 1830 and dedicated to M.J. de Sayve, an amateur musician in Paris. These quartets met with considerable critical success. For example, Johann Philipp Schmidt, a composer himself, and reviewer of Onslow's Op.36 String Quartets for the highly respected *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, wrote of the Quartets that they were of "*...elegant character. Every piece is well developed exhibiting a profound realization of motive with great diversity of invention."* Comparing these works with the Late Quartets of Beethoven, to which I may add they bear no resemblance, Schmidt comments that Onslow's Op.36 Quartets "*may pass beyond*

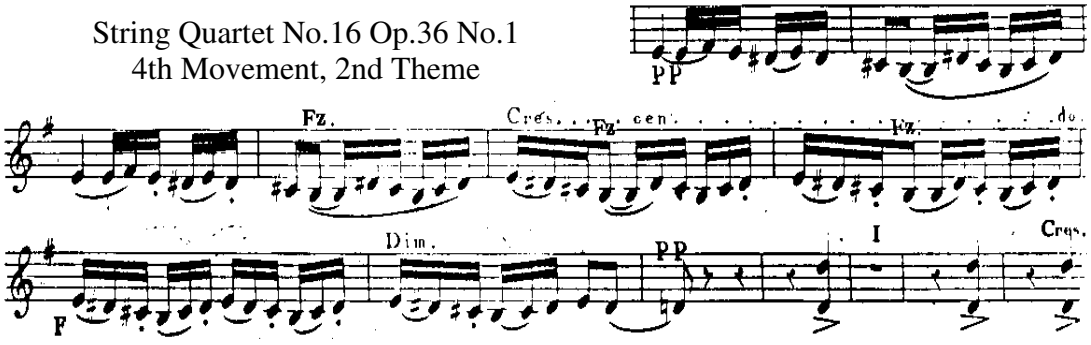
the comprehension of the listener. Nonetheless, they represent 'genuine quartet music' and call for expert performance." And they did get expert performance. Quartet Nos.16-17, Op.36 No.1-2 were played throughout Germany and abroad—especially in Russia—by the famous Müller Brothers Quartet, perhaps the premiere quartet before the public at that time. Quartet No.18, early on, was championed by Ferdinand Ries' ensemble. This quartet is but one of a few which remained popular long after Onslow's death and remained in the repertoire of many groups until the end of the 19th Century.

The *Allegro* to **String Quartet No.16, Op. 36 No.1 in e minor** opens with a dramatic dialogue between the first violin and cello, which immediately captivates the listener. The dramatic effect is heightened by the fact that the melody rises in the violin and then plunges in the answering cello part. (see left) Few could match Onslow in achieving such an effect, which he time and again was able to replicate with ease. The melodic material is passed from voice to voice. The second theme is an organic outgrowth of the first melody which almost makes its appearance unnoticed because of its close relationship to the first theme. This movement is an excellent example of one of the individualistic characteristics which marks Onslow's quartet music——it is a perfect fusion of operatic drama and melody with chamber music style. In the following *Andante Grazioso,* the lovely opening theme is given to the cello in its tenor register, although it is written in treble clef. A long (29 measure) and difficult passage of 32nd notes of almost obbligato writing in the first violin creates a gauze-like filigree while still remaining within the bounds of chamber music. The *Minuetto Presto*, in actuality a scherzo, is of the type of which Onslow always excelled——it is at once haunting and full propulsive motion. (see left) A *maggiore* stately trio section E major is a wonderful contrast to the e minor presto. The finale, *Allegretto*, is a big movement. The first theme has an Italian vocal quality to it that one might associate with Viotti. The ingenious second theme) see below), passed from voice to voice each time modulated to increase tension, is full of bravado in a French military fashion.



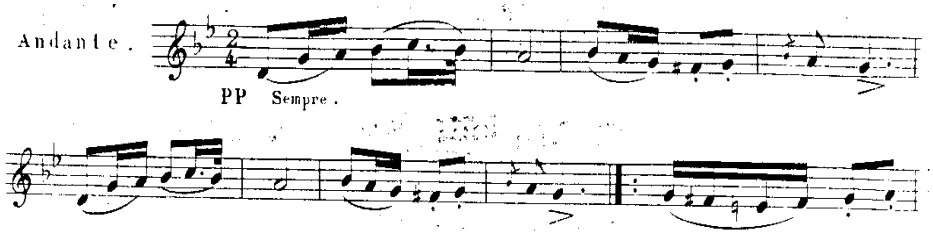


String Quartet No.16 Op.36 No.1
4th Movement, 2nd Theme

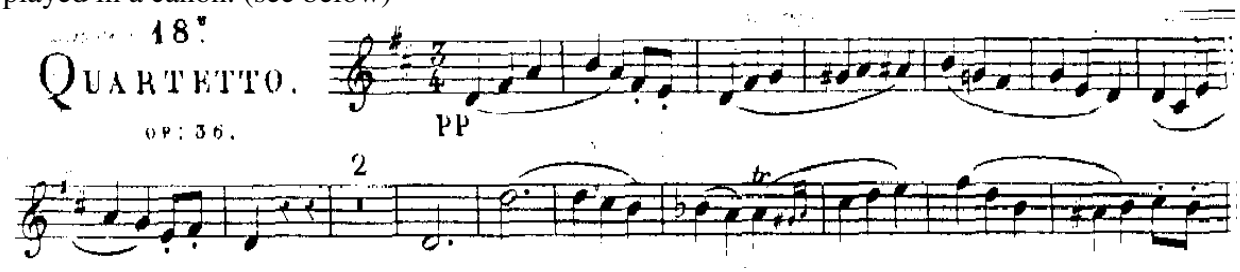


This quartet is first rate and deserves to be heard in concert. It should pose no problems to experienced amateurs with a strong first violinist.

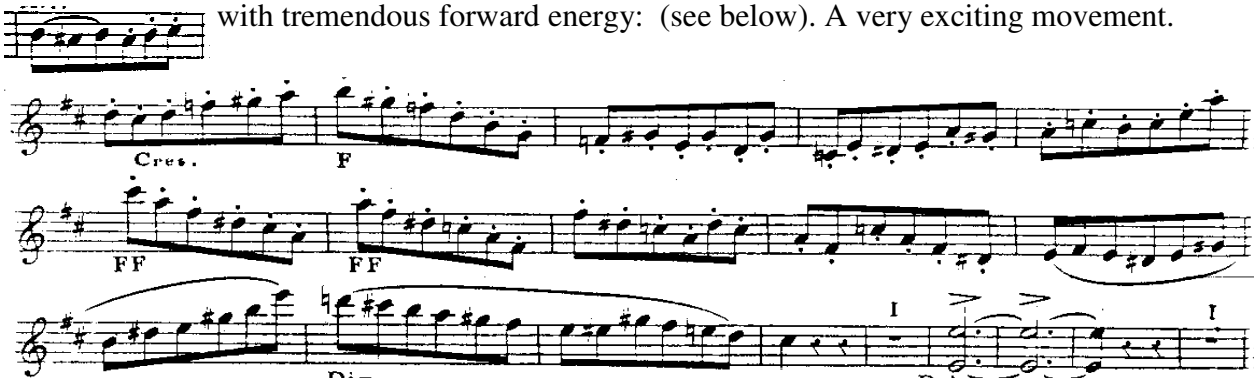
String Quartet No.17, Op.36 No.2 in E flat major is another excellent work. The first movement, *Allegro* begins with a heroic rising theme based on a turn. Each of the voices is given a chance to participate in this solidly written and typically chromatic movement. The second movement, *Menuetto, Allegro*, is not a scherzo, but a real minuet, which nonetheless must be played at lightening speed (104 to the dotted half-note). The arresting trio, which also must be played rapidly, is a kind of march. The first violin, alone, is given the melody throughout to a drum-like accompaniment in the other strings. Next comes an *Andante* (see below left) which is a theme and set of five excellent variations. The theme is yet another *Air Populaire des Montagnes d'Auvergne*. Few composers have written so often and so well in this format. The finale, *Allegro vivace*, a sure-fire audience pleaser, is in 6/8. It might just as well have been subtitled *La Chasse.* It is a breakneck gallop conjuring up images of horses racing across open fields and over hedges. This Quartet also should be of interest to both professionals and good amateurs.



It fruitless to talk about 'bests' and 'strongests' however, it is surely fair to say that **String Quartet No.18, Op.36 No.3 in D** belongs in the first rank of not just Onslow's quartets but of the literature as a whole. The opening *Allegro vivace* begins with a jaunty, song-like tune played in a canon. (see below)

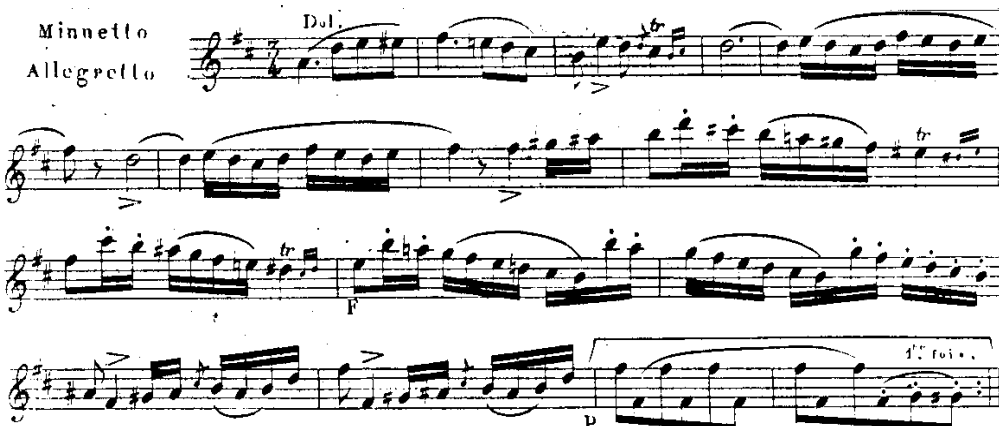


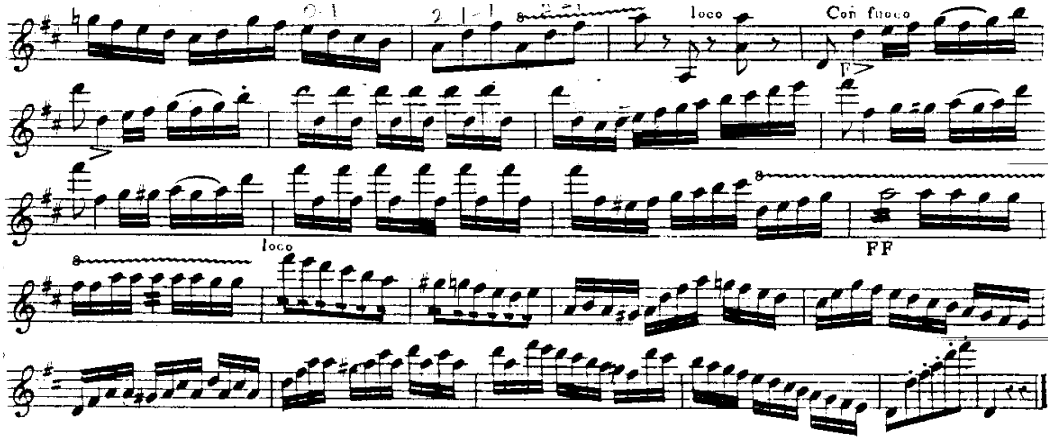
No sooner do the lower voices finish the canon than the second theme (see below) bursts forth with tremendous forward energy: (see below). A very exciting movement.



An *Andante non troppo lento* follows. This is a simple country melody which Onslow elegantly embellishes.

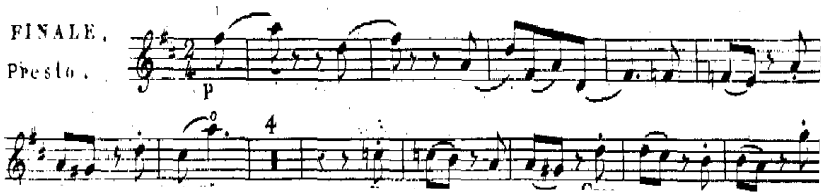
The *Minuetto Allegretto* (see right) is a scherzo par excellence, of the sort for which Mendelssohn became famous. The catchy, syncopated first theme is developed with military modulations.





The dazzling conclusion to this outstanding movement is the equal of the most famous scherzos. I have performed it in front of audiences who knew better but yet applauded at its conclusion, such was its affect.

The light, buoyant *Finale, Presto* (see right) is yet another gem which strikes just the right touch: Snippets of the playful main theme are passed from voice to voice. This wonderful quartet belongs in everyone's collection. It should be in the professional quartet's repertoire and on disk. How can music like this disappear? This quartet is first rate and deserves to be heard in concert. It should pose no problems to experienced amateurs with a strong first violinist.



After the Op.36 Quartets, Onslow composed another string quintet, No. 14 in F, Op.37. It was dedicated to his friend, the violin virtuoso, Charles de Beriot. De Beriot, who had come to Paris from Brussels, had studied with Baillot and Viotti but gradually adapted his style of playing to accommodate the dazzling innovations made by Paganini. It was this change which led to his prominence and which also seems to have influenced the violin part to the Quintet. The next work he composed, Quintet No.15 in c, Op.38, called *The Bullet,* is perhaps the one which was best known during the last part of the 19th Century. It is a programmatic account of his terrible hunting accident which took place during the summer of 1829 about 100 miles north of his home. Onslow, who enjoyed hunting, was not particularly keen on shooting, instead preferring, as he put it, to hunt in the fashion of Pliny. Here Onslow was alluding to Pliny's famous

comment to the effect that while he often returned home from the hunt without game, he felt more than compensated when he emptied his game bag with writing tablets full of new and ingenious thoughts. Thus it was that Onslow who often 'hunted' spent the time composing. On the fateful day, Onlsow's friends, knowing his proclivities, posted him as a lookout for wild boar by a tree. After a while, his attention waned and he began composing while unconsciously wandering from his post. Suddenly a boar crossed in front of him. Onlsow shot at it and missed. Meanwhile, dogs began barking and hunters shooting. In the confusion, he was shot twice in the head., the force of one bullet knocked him off his horse onto the ground. His wounds were quite serious. One bullet pierced his cheek, passed through his inner ear and lodged in the back of his neck. The second bullet also lodged in his neck. He would almost certainly have died on the ground, suffocating in his own blood, had his friends, who were but a few feet away, not come to his help. Somehow, he was taken on horseback to the host's Chateau where he lay delirious with fever and racked with pain. He called out several times in torment, afraid he would be unable to finish the composition he had begun to sketch before being shot. The next day he was transported some 50 miles to be operated on. One bullet was removed but the other could not be extracted and remained in his neck the rest of his life. Despite their efforts, his doctors thought his death was imminent. Nonetheless he survived, but for many months a virulent fever, which threatened his life, would come and go.

During these trying times, he often composed to ease his pain. After a long period of rest and further medical treatment he made a recuperation but he really never fully recovered his health. Over time, he went deaf in his left ear. This forced him to give up publicly performing the cello in chamber groups. His solo piano playing was less affected but he began to loose interest in the piano. He very occasionally suffered from some sort of nervous disorder after the accident and also developed a slight speech impediment. The accident left him permanently disfigured. (See photograph on right) Onslow's father Edward, with whom George had had a close relationship, died in October of 1829 while the composer was still convalescing. This did not greatly help his recovery.

Plaster bust of Onslow c. age 60 by Jean-Pierre Dantan. Note indentations on left cheek and to side of left eye.

Although the story of how Onslow composed Quintet No.15 and its subsequent history are interesting, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study. Immediately after No.15, Onslow wrote yet two more string quintets: No.16 in E Major, Op.39 and No.17 in b minor. String Quintet No.16 was to be one of his most popular chamber works.

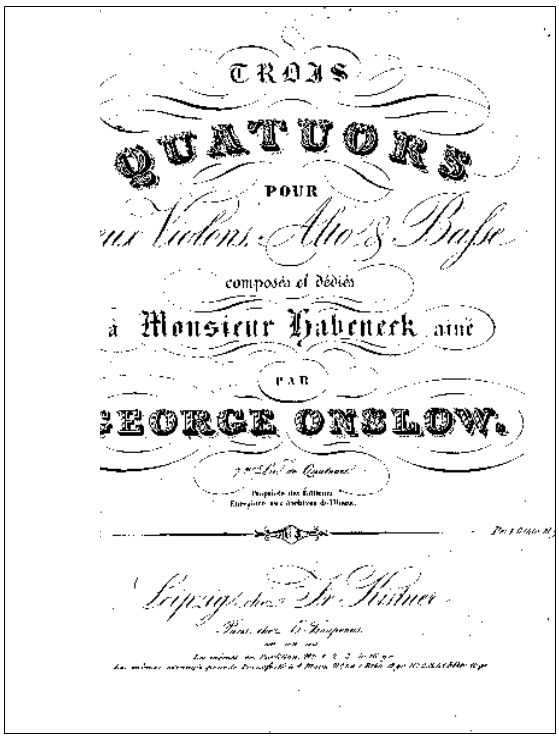
The late 1820s saw a steady rise in Onslow's reputation in France. He was already well-known in Germany, Austria and England. Around 1830, we begin to find French critics referring to him as '*le Beethoven français*.' For example, his Paris publisher, Pleyel, brought out a collected edition of Onslow's quartets in 1830 and prefaced the edition with the following endorsement:

> *The continuing increasing celebrity of these productions in which are conspicuous originality without caprice, learning without dryness and grace without affectation, renders it desirable that they should be published in a form worthy to rank with the collections of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven— France is proud in having given birth to this distinguished amateur whom she can confidently place in competition with the most able*

masters of the other nations of Europe. This edition will have...a portrait and...a facsimile of a composition from the pen of our French Beethoven.

This was an interesting and important development. First, it is worth noting that Pleyel was a transplanted Austrian. He had been a student of Haydn and a respected composer in his own right. He, perhaps better than the native French, could appreciate Beethoven, who did not win quick recognition with the French as he did in the German-speaking world. For a long time, the French never accepted Beethoven's music and did not rank it with that of Mozart or Haydn. His forms were regarded as too complex, his harmony too abstract, mathematical and even barbaric. Onslow had complained during the early 1820s that his countrymen seemed to have excessive difficulty in understanding his musical ideas. Onslow's biographer, Dr. Franks, writes, "*Much of the difficulty Onslow confronted in winning early acceptance for his works among his countrymen was related to their reluctance to fit Beethoven's music into the tradition they had come to look upon as their own."* Here it is important to remember that we are not talking about the Late or Middle Quartets but Beethoven's Opus 18! To the French, Onslow's musical style represented the awkward qualities of 'Germanisms' associated with Beethoven. Whether or not this was an accurate assessment of Onslow's music is beside the point. Thus it was, Dr. Franks theorizes, that it was not until after Berlioz and the famous conductor, François Habeneck, popularized the music of Beethoven that there was any real acceptance of Onslow's chamber music in France.

As he had for Beethoven, Berlioz led the crusade for Onslow, stating that since Beethoven's death, it was Onslow who wielded "the scepter of instrumental music." By 1830, Onslow's music was being performed on a regular basis at the Paris Conservatory's concerts. His rise in popularity probably would not have come solely on the shoulders of chamber music. It must in great part be attributed to the fact that he started composing larger scale compositions for the public concert hall. As noted earlier, his opera *L'Colporteur* enjoyed considerable success in Paris. In 1830, at the age of 46, Onslow at last turned his attention to the Symphony. His First Symphony, Op.41 in A Major met with considerable acclaim. No less an authority than Cherubini, the dictator of French musical taste, gave it his stamp of approval. It soon became very popular throughout Germany and Austria as well. The next year he followed this up with a Second Symphony, Op.42 dedicated to the Philharmonic Society of London. As a result, Onslow became the second honorary member of the Society. (The first was Mendelssohn.) Symphony No.2 was followed by three more quintets, Nos.18-20, Opp.43-45.

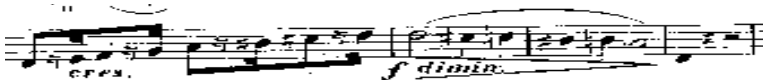

TROIS
QUATUORS
POUR
Violons, Alto & Basse
composés et dédiés
à Monsieur Habeneck aîné
PAR
GEORGE ONSLOW.

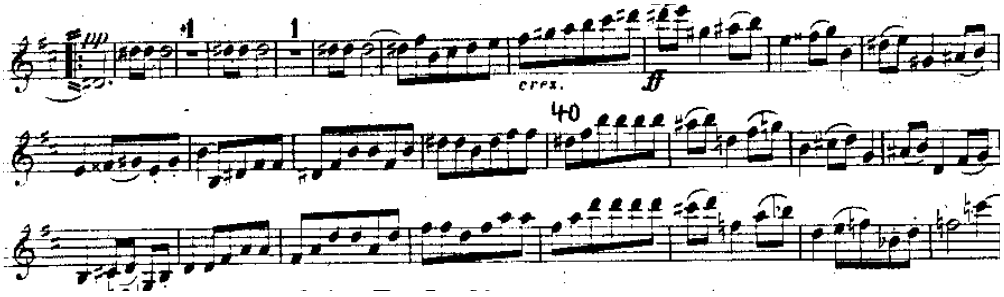
The Op.46 Quartets, Nos.19-21 were composed during the summer of 1831. They were dedicated to Monsieur Habeneck, in all likelihood the famous conductor who had done so much to popularize his work, although it is possible that the dedication was to his son a well-known violinist. These works,

which as one might expect of works written some years apart, represent an important advance in Onslow's style. The Op.46 Quartets enjoyed considerable popularity and were regularly performed in such premier places as Vienna, Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden.

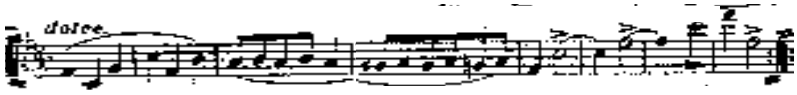
The opening movement to **String Quartet No.19, Op.46 No.1 in f# minor,** *Allegro espressivo e non troppo presto,*

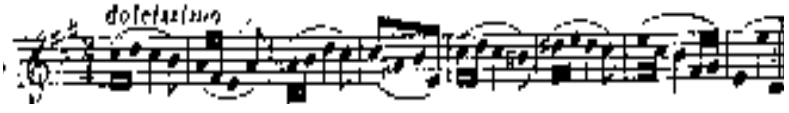
begins with a tragic and emotionally charged outcry of great power. (see above) It is played in unison and one of the most striking openings of any Onslow quartet. It is then given to the cello to introduce the chromatic and somewhat sinister, main theme which rises quickly but then collapses downward slowly, almost as if melting away. (see right) There is a rhythmic relationship between this theme and the opening outcry: Long stretches of thematic material presented in this 16th—8th, 16th—8th rhythm infuses the movement with a sense of space and galloping forward motion while the melodic material creates a feeling of urgency. This is an exciting movement in which all four voices contribute throughout.





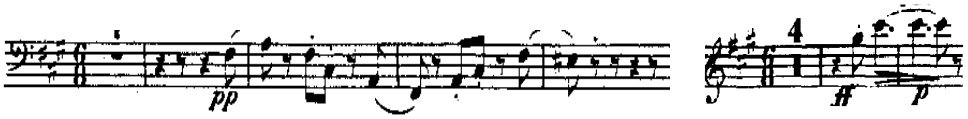
The second movement, *Menuetto-Allegro*, has a genial feel to it, not quite a scherzo though too quick for an old-fashioned minuet it is nonetheless an impetuous dance. The beautifully contrasting trio, marked *dolce,* is based on a dreamy hunt-like theme. (see right)



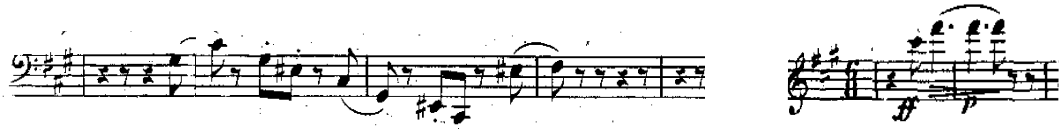


The following *Andante* is a typical example of Onslow's compositional brilliance. Taking what is a very gentle and pastoral theme, (see above right) he writes a set of variations which explore every possible mood including a military setting which is a *tour de force*. Few composers have composed as many fine theme and variation movements as Onslow.

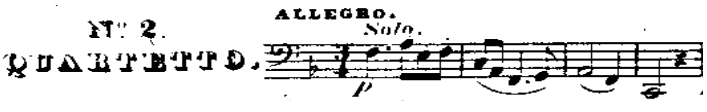
The superb finale, *Allegro moderato*, is quintessential Onslow: Drama, excitement, tuneful melodies, toe-tapping rhythms—it's all there. As the cello (below left) quietly beckons with half of the main theme, the violin interrupts with great urgency. (see below)



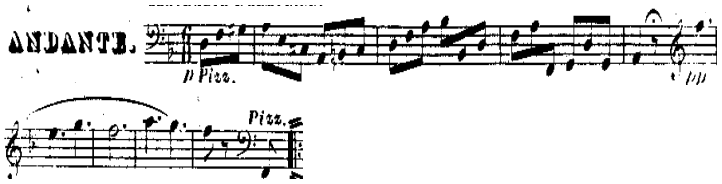
The cello then states the second half of the theme, with no less urgency, the violin replies:

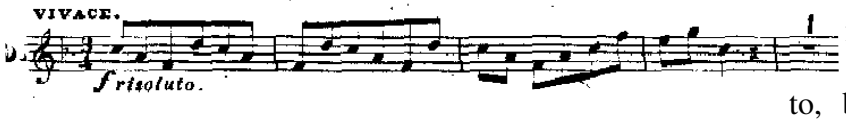


This a very exciting movement throughout, right up to and including the surprise ending in which the cello sneaks away *pp* with the movement. First rate, masterpiece, these are but mere words to describe a quartet which can stand comparison with works of any composer writing at this time. It deserves to be performed and would be an ornament in any professional ensemble's repertoire. Parts are available from Edition Silvertrust.



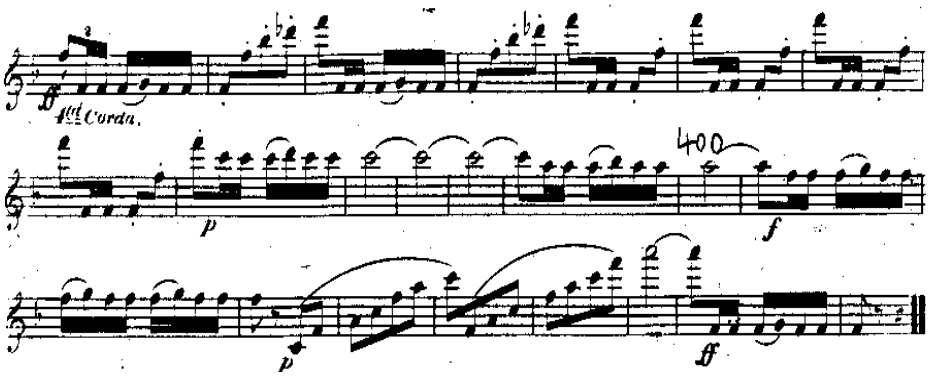
The main theme of the opening movement, *Allegro,* to the second quartet in this set of three, **String Quartet No.20 in F, Op.46 No.2,** is given to the cello as a brief solo. (see left) It is a genial movement but with none of the tension, drama or excitement one so often encounters in the opening movements to Onslow's quartets. In the second movement, *Andante sostenuto e semplice*, Onslow's use of pizzicato to present the melody against long sustained chords in the other voices is conceived and executed masterfully. (see right) First the cello is given the theme against the upper three voices, then the first violin against the lower three voices with the cello playing in its treble register.



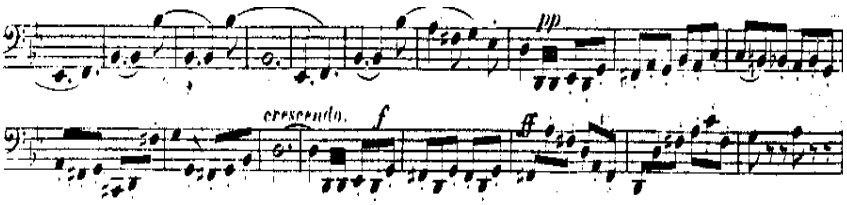


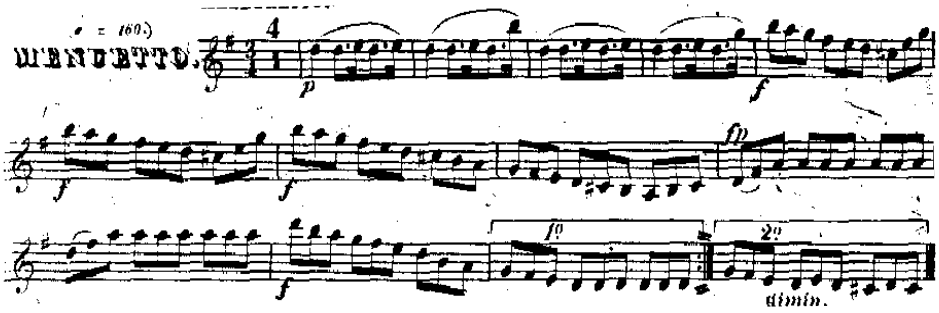
The *Menuetto vivace* which follows (see left) is certainly nothing that could be danced to, but it is a captivating moto perpetuo. The charming contrasting trio is reminiscent of the hunting theme from Rossini's *William Tell*.

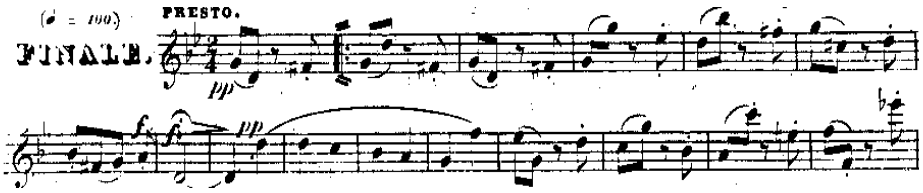
In the finale, *Allegro vivace e scherzo*, the drum-like rhythm of the opening theme serves to propel the music forward from start to rousing finish. (right) This is another fine quartet which should be of interest to both amateurs and professionals. Like most of Onslow's quartets, the music is available from Merton Music Unfortunately, there is no recording of it.



The dramatic opening to the first movement, *Allegro non troppo vivo*, of **String Quartet No.21, Op.46 No.3 in g minor** immediately grabs the listener's attention. A series of powerful chords gives way to a low-pitched, soft, sinister, somewhat syncopated theme in the viola and cello, which reminds me a bit of the scherzo to Dohnanyi's Second Quartet, Op.15. (example on right) Throughout this movement, rhythmic sycopation plays an important role in the thematic material. There is a surviving account by one of Onlsow's friends about the fact that the composer was particularly proud of the *Adagio religioso* to this quartet, especially as to its expressiveness. It is a good movement but I am not sure it deserves to be singled out, as Dr. Franks does, for special praise. Again the device of using the cello to give forth the melody with pizzicato triplets to long chords in the other voices is used, but to an even greater degree than in Op.46 No.2. The sunny, carefree *Menuetto allegretto* (see below) is a curious mix. It sounds, at times, almost Haydnesque and yet there is a certain something to it which places it later than the Vienna Classics. There is a very short trio in which one can hear storm clouds gathering from a distance but nothing comes of it and the sunny mood of the trio quickly breaks forth again. As in the prior two quartets, we have yet another very strong finale. Marked *Presto*, there is incredible forward drive and excitement to this movement as the main theme clearly illustrates. (see left) This excellent quartet surely belongs in the concerthall. It has been recorded recently by the Mandelring Quartet CPO CD 999 329.



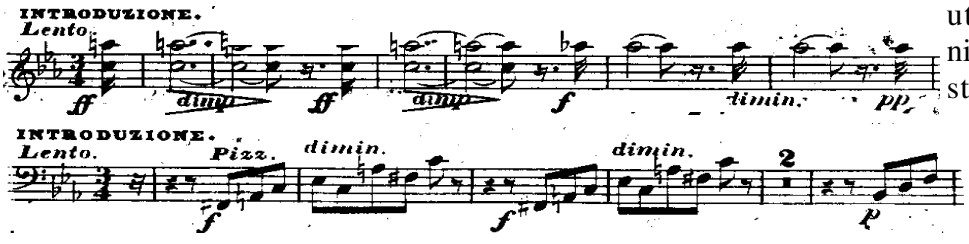




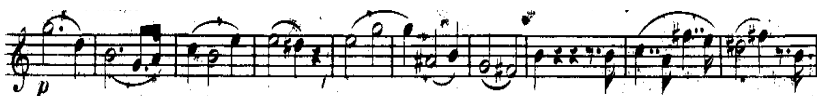
Information on Onslow's life between 1831 and 1833, the dates separating his 21st from his 22nd Quartet, is hard to come by. Apparently, after composing the Op.46 Quartets, he did not devote himself to composition but concentrated on recovery during this period as nothing else was written. The Onslow family typically spent their winters in Paris and the rest of year in the Auvergne. We have no reason to believe they altered this pattern during these two years.

The next work that Onlsow wrote was **String Quartet No.22 in C, Op.47** which was composed in the spring of 1833 and published that same year by Kistner and Troupenas. This work is unusual for at least two reasons. This was the first time Onslow published only one quartet rather than a set of three under an opus number. All of the other quartets had been issued as sets of three and assigned to one opus number in the same manner as Beethoven's Op.59 quartets. It is not clear why Onslow made the change and his biographer, Dr. Franks, provides no

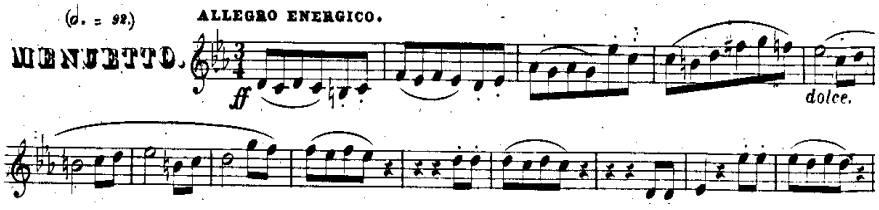
explanation nor even gives any indication that he was aware of the fact. In the case of the string quintets, Onslow only issued one set of three, the Op.1 which date from 1806. After that, each quintet was issued with its own unique opus number. It may simply be that in France, the practice of issuing quartets in sets lasted longer than in Austria. The second unusual thing about this quartet is that it does not have a real tonal center, but alternates between c minor and C Major. The opening movement begins in c minor with an *Introduzione-Lento.* From the first



utterance of the nightmarish double-stops, which are interspersed with ghost-like broken-chord pizzicato in the cello, the listener senses that this is no ordinary quartet. One hears all of the power of Beethoven's Opp.74 & 95 and then some. A tremendous sense of impending tragedy and doom hangs over these outbursts, which are clearly raised in defiance of some implacable fate. The main part of the movement, *Allegro*, is in C Major but is no less dramatic. The rhythmically pulsing opening theme, with a destiny motif, is first entrusted to the viola. The second theme is broad and more spacious but also conveys this same feeling of destiny as well as a mood of hope. (see right) Here



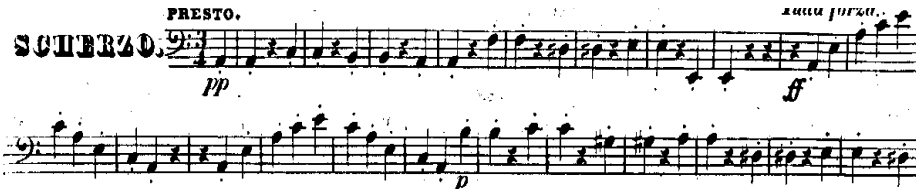
especially, the tonal center keeps shifting back and forth with tremendous effect. The part-writing is superb.



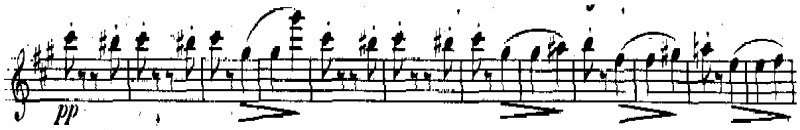
The second movement, *Menuetto Allegro,* is really a scherzo. Played at breakneck speed, it is every bit as powerful and fine as the first movement. You are not going to find music more exciting than this. The trio, a marvelous viola solo, sciolto e leggiero, is every bit as good as the main section. In the lovely *Andante*, the cello's pizzicato gives out the first half of a classic folktune to which the first violin replies with the rest. The second theme, full of yearning, is shared by the first violin and cello both playing in high registers an octave apart, later it is given to both violins again in octaves. The finale, *Presto,* is opened by the viola with a hunt-like theme. The whole movement is reminiscent in feel and construction to the exciting last movement of Mozart's K.387 (Keep in mind, I am not talking about sounding like Mozart—it is pure Onslow). Now at last clearly in major, the thematic material has all the same joy, buoyancy and happiness of Mozart's and generates the same tremendous excitement from its 'hell for leather' pace. There is even an exciting fugual section to boot. This quartet is a masterpiece in every way. It should considered by any performing quartet. Throughout the 19 century, it appeared on programs with the likes Beethoven's Op.59, 74 & 95 and Haydn's Op.76 and judging from contemporaneous critical reviews, it did not come out second best. No less a personage than the then editor of the most prestigious musical journal in Germany, the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, recognized Op.47's tremendous qualities. He found it 'modern, turbulent, full of pathos, variegate, exciting and mysterious.' He went on to note that Onslow "did not owe the success of his music to Beethoven or Haydn, with

whom he is often compared, but to himself. For he has developed the manner of his writing independently and thoroughly." Also recorded by the Mandelring Quartet on CPO 999 060. The parts are available from Edition Silvertrust.

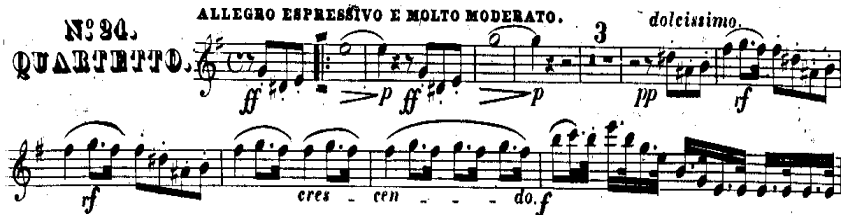
String Quartet No.23, Op.48 A Major was completed a year later in the summer of 1834 and published early in 1835. The opening movement, *Allegro grazioso e moderato*, has a certain limpness to it that is uncharacteristic of Onslow's opening movements. The first theme, which is gentle and genial, has a Biedermeier parlor quality to it. It eventually leads to a somewhat more interesting but concerto-like section for the first violin, which is given a more prominent role than one normally finds in Onslow. The second movement, *Andante*, is more in the manner of brisk intermezzo. It has charming themes with the same forward movement as the *andante scherzoso* of Beethoven's Op.18 No.4. Of the *Scherzo presto* which comes next, it would be best to characterize it as "Seldom equalled, never surpassed." The cello and viola introduce the



spooky, lop-sided, off beat opening theme (see left)The trio, the slowest music in the quartet, is but a brief 16 measure interlude, in this helter-skelter, amazing movement which, with its (for that time) modern-sounding tonalities, clearly indicates that Onslow was keeping abreast of, if not pioneering developments. The finale, *Allegro vivace,* has an exciting opening theme. (see right) Suprisingly, Onslow snuffs out the excitement with the second



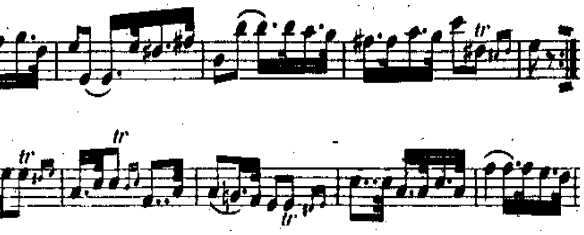
theme, a series of drawing-room chromatic passages. When the first theme is reintroduced, it is then followed by long running, virtuosic passages in all the voices that do not really give any direction to things. This is a very difficult quartet to evaluate as a whole because of the unevenness of the movements. The middle two movements are very good (the *Scherzo* is on a par with the writing in Op.47) but the outer movements are not strong enough, in my opinion, to justify the reintroduction of this quartet onto the concert stage. I say this with some hesitation because I would not like to see these middle movements consigned to oblivion. This is still a quartet well-worth playing and can be recommended to amateurs with a strong first violinist. There is a good recording of Op.48 by the Quatour Debussy on an Advidis Valois CD #4749.

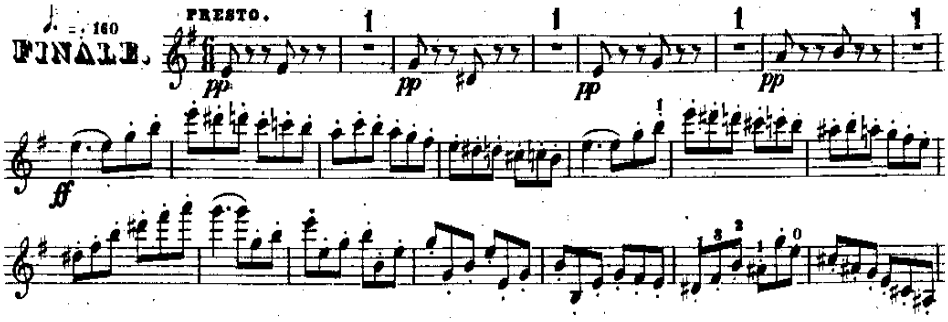


String Quartet No.24 in e minor, Op.49 was completed at the same time as No.23. It was dedicated to Ferdinand Hiller, a fairly important musical personality at that time and a well-known, pianist, composer and conductor. With the captivating opening unison theme to the first movement, *Allegro espressivo e molto moderato*, we find that Onslow has regained his dramatic touch. (see above) The part writing and distribution of thematic material is more evenly dispersed among the voices and each makes important contributions. The second movement, *Menuetto—Moderato e grazioso* is for once a minuet, although an updated one. Unlike the minuet in Op.47, which has as much power as a Beethoven *scherzo*, here there is elegance and grace. However, in the trio section, we are treated to a light military style march.

The violin is given the syncopated melody to drumbeat quarter notes in the other parts. (see right)

Onslow begins the following *Andante* with a lovely folk melody which is somber but not sad. It is to be played *pp* and *legato*. With the second theme, he then changes the mood to that of a military march that might be played at the funeral of a fallen general.(see right) This is followed then followed in turn with the somber first theme and then a third theme in 16th notes played *molto staccato*. Again the first them is brought back in the lower voices but the first violins plays a filigree obbligato of 32nd notes which gives it a very different feel from the other times it was played. At last, the movement creeps away as Onslow disembodies the first theme. The whole thing comes close to being a theme and set of variations. There is a relationship between the themes, however it is not the same theme which appears rather: A—B—A—C—A&D—A. Furthermore, unlike most variations where now the cello has it, now the viola & cello, now the first & viola etc., etc., all four instruments work together as they do in normal contrapuntal writing. This whole thing is finely put together as well as being fun to play and good to hear. The finale, a *Presto* in 6/8, begins in unison, softly and with the kind of pregnant pauses which signal that something is about to happen. (see left) A violent storm is then unleashed, taking the listener and player alike on an unbridled and exciting gallop from start to finish in which all four parts have their say. While not quite on the level of Op.47, this quartet is a very good work. There is no very great disparity in the quality of the movements. It should be examined by both professionals and amateurs alike and is strong enough to deserve performance on the concert stage. Unfortunately, there is currently no recording available of this fine work.

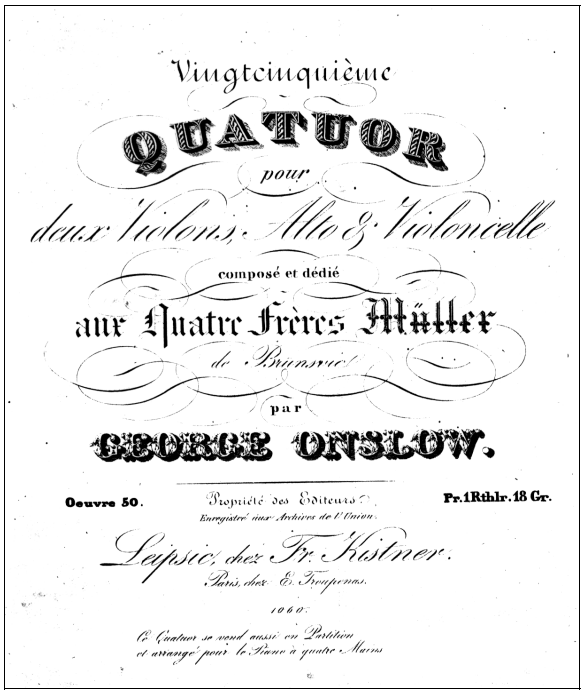




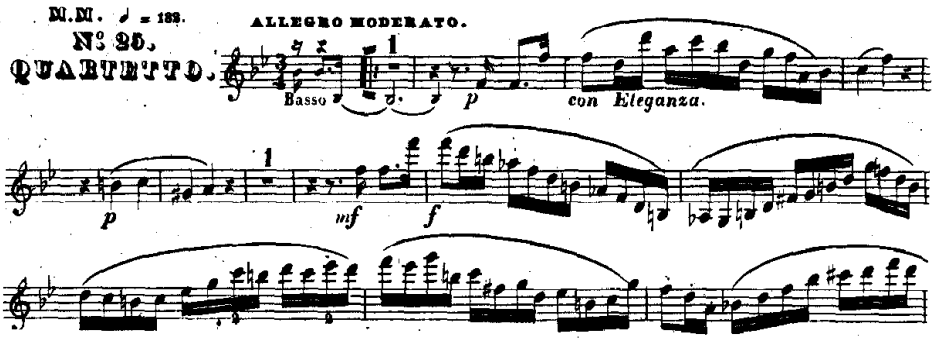
String Quartet Nos.25-27 were composed between 1834 and 1836. Onslow was 50 years old in 1834 and his reputation abroad was well-established. In France, during the preceding years, his stock had risen as well and he was considered either very close to or in the front rank of French composers. In the autumn of 1834, Adrien Boïeldieu, one of the creators of what was then modern French comic opera died. Boïeldieu had been a member of the Academie des Beaux Arts. Formed in 1795, the Academie was part of the prestigious Institut de France, which itself had been created to improve the arts and sciences. Because of Boïeldieu's death, a seat on the Academie then fell vacant. In the weeks that followed, there was a scramble among France's

prominent composers to line up support of the membership as they elected new members. Onslow, who had been a friend of Boïeldieu, believed his chances were good. He argued his case maintaining that the Academie lacked any true representative of French instrumental music. When Onslow learned that his old teacher, Antonin Reicha, a transplanted Austro-Czech, was also running for the slot, he tried to withdraw his name writing that he only wished to be admitted after his "venerable master and friend." Interestingly, he was not allowed to withdraw. Of the six muscians running, Onslow finished third behind Reicha and Halevy.

Despite this setback, Onslow's popularity within France reached new heights when hiswas the first of a series of biographical essays on celebrated contemporary composers featured in the new critical journal, *Gazette musicale de Paris*. François Stoepel, the man who conceived and penned the series, wrote of Onslow as "*...a man without a living rival in the field of chamber music...*" an unquestionable authority on string instruments and upon the quartets and quintets of the Viennese masters. By this time, Onslow's opinions on questions pertaining to chamber music were so respected within France that later when Stoepel and his *Gazette* became involved in an controversy over the worth or legitimacy of Beethoven's Late Quartets, he called upon Onslow for support. Onslow supplied an analysis showing that Beethoven's Op.132 was just as carefully organized as his Op.18 No.4 and was not the product of a "demented mind" but was possessed of the same logic as the earlier work.


Vingtcinquième
QUATUOR
pour
deux Violons, Alto & Violoncelle
composé et dédié
aux Quatre Frères Müller
de Brunswic
par
GEORGE ONSLOW.
Oeuvre 50. Propriété des Editeurs. Fr. 1 Rthlr. 18 Gr.
Enregistré aux Archives de l'Union.
Leipsic, chez Fr. Kistner.
Paris, chez E. Troupenas.
1840.
Cet Quatuor se vend aussi en Partition et arrangé pour le Piano à quatre Mains

Onslow's **String Quartet No.25, Op.50 in Bb** was composed about the same time as Nos.23 & 24. Dr. Franks, Onslow's biographer, dates its composition from August of 1834. It was published the following year and dedicated to the Müller Brothers, who were at the time unquestionably the finest performing quartet before the public. This quartet was performed throughout Germany and Austria to great acclaim. Extant concert programs and subsequent newspaper reviews of these concerts showed that it was often presented on the same program with what are still today very well-known works, for example: Beethoven's Op.74, *The Harp*, Schubert's Nos.13 & 14 *Death & the Maiden*, Mendelssohn's Op.44 No.1, Spohr's 3rd Double Quartet, Op.87 and the Mendelssohn Octet. Onslow's quartet generally received praise at least as great as that of its program mates.



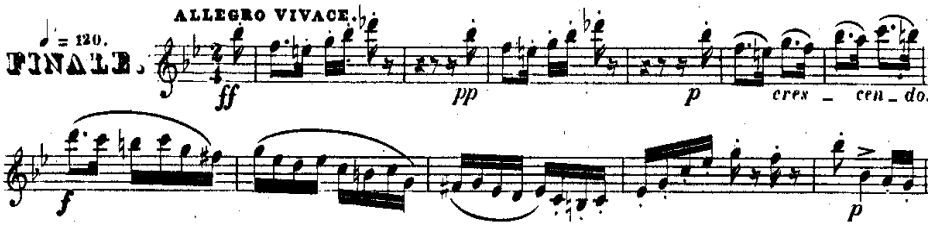
The opening theme to the first movement, *Allegro moderato,* of Quartet No.25 is a concerto-like passage in the first violin. (see right) Recognizing the difficulty of trying to pass this around from voice to voice, no one else is given it and it does not appear again in its entirety. Rather the accompaniement in the other voices is made into another theme. A second subject, *staccato e marcato*, is a very effective

military type march introduced by the cello. A third theme, developed out of the cello's very short solo opening measure, is effectively used to close out the movement. A marvellous

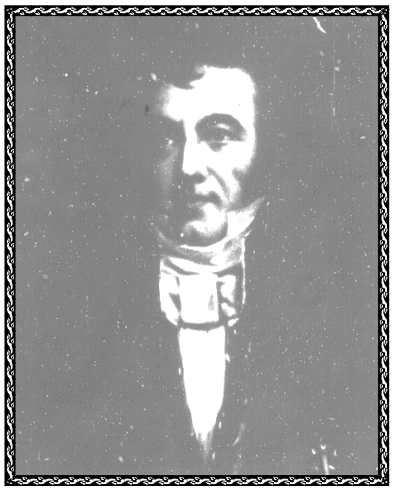
Scherzo, vivace assai, comes next. The wonderful chromatic opening theme played in unison is deftly passed between the voices .This is vintage Onslow, however to be effective, it must be played at a good clip. The contrasting trio is a legato horn-like hunt theme, sounded in the distance *à la Schubert,* to pulsating eighth notes in the back ground.

An *Andante grazioso* follows. One might argue that here Onslow writes a

textbook example of what an andante grazioso ought to be like. It is gentle, graceful and lovely. In Onslow's slow movements, one so often encounters a turbulent middle section, frequently of great pathos and depth of feeling, juxtaposed between his opening theme and the recapitulation, that one somehow feels cheated coming across a slow movement without such a section. Here, though, it would be out of place, perhaps even grotesque.

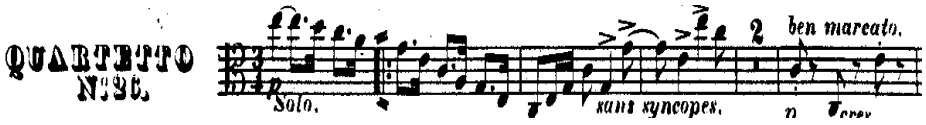


In the finale, *Allegro vivace*, Onslow's sense of the dramatic is at the fore. From the very start there are certain rhythmic difficulties. For the most part, the first violin is given the lion's share of the thematic material in what is certainly a very exciting last movement. In sum, this is quite a nice quartet, worthy of attention by amateurs and professionals, although, in my opinion, it does not rank among his very best.



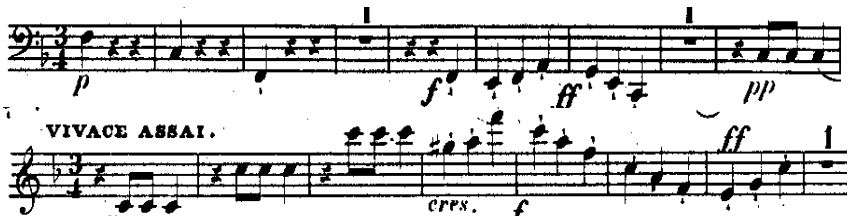
Oil Painting of Onslow dating from the 1830's

String Quartet No.26, Op.52 in C was composed toward the end of 1834 and beginning of 1835. It dates from the time when Steopel asked for Onslow's help in defending Beethoven's Late Quartets and Onslow's subsequent analysis of Op.18 No.4 and Op. 132. It seems more than likely that Beethoven was on Onslow's mind about the time he composed this work and his treatment of the themes rather than the themes themselves bear witness to this. The Quartet was published in 1836 and dedicated to Charles Cornault, most probably an amateur musician living in Paris. Again judging from extant concert programs, the Twenty Sixth Quartet enjoyed great popularity and remained in the repertoire for quite some time, being performed with such works as Beethoven's Op.133, the quarets of Cherubini, Mozart's String Quintet in g minor, K.516, and the Spohr double quartets.



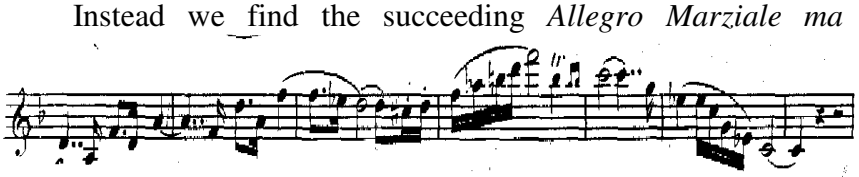
In the opening movement, *Allegro con brio,* the viola introduces the main subject which is of a carefree sort of nature. (see left) In what is a fairly long movement, Onslow takes this four measure theme and explores it exhaustively, much in the manner of Beethoven. A calmer, more lyrical second theme (see right) is given to the first violin and cello in turns. The first theme is used to close the movement and though the ending is well-wrought, the theme, a rather jolly motif, lacks sufficient excitement in my opinion to make it as successful as it might otherwise have been. The second movement, *Adagio Grandioso*, is a long and deeply-felt lied given over to the first violin with an effective accompaniment in the inner voices.

The following *Menuetto, vivace assai*, is the most striking of the Quartet's movements. (see right) The main theme is dissected with the first beat being given to the three lower voices while the rest of the theme is completed by the first violin on the after beats. A mysterious and calmer middle section, marked *con innocenza,* provides a superb contrast to the boisterous first theme. This is a very fine movement and is a typical example of Onslow's craft and the sort of music one does not come across in the literature elsewhere. The listener cannot help but be struck by its originality of thought and freshness.

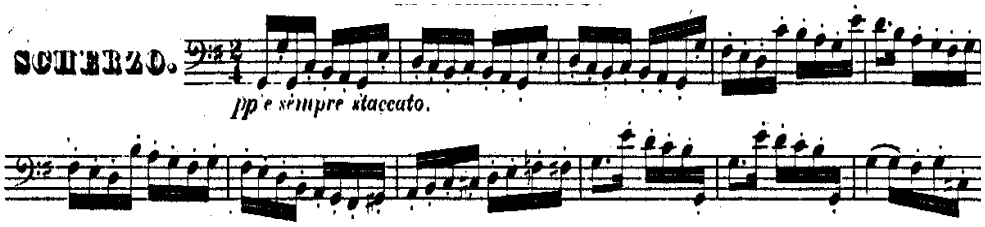


In the first two notes of the finale, *Allegro*, Onslow teasingly holds the players back before letting loose with a rollicking triplet theme full of forward motion and excitement. The movement races along with all joining in as it moves to a *tutte forza* close. It's not hard to see why this quartet remained popular, and it, along with so many others, deserves to be revived.

String Quartet No.27, Op.53 in D was composed in the spring of 1835 and dedicated to Monsieur Paul-Antoine Cap, a French polymath. The opening movement begins with a 24 measure *Preludio Largo.* The introduction in d minor suggests that something tragic is about to occur. But nothing does. Instead we find the succeeding *Allegro Marziale ma moderato* in D Major quite bright. However, long scale-like passages in all of the voices, with awkward handoffs from voice to voice, makes this movement very tricky to put together. Onslow was quite fond of inserting martial themes into his music and the effect was usually quite successful.

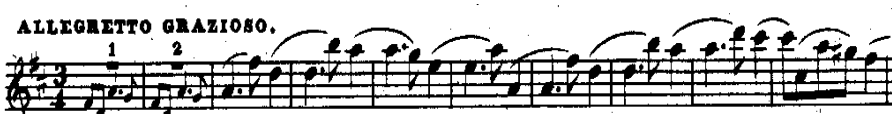


Here, the theme is simply too florid and has neither drama nor military quality to it. A very short middle section (see left) in minor is far better and shows considerable promise. But Onslow barely states it once before returning to the first theme. and the difficulty both technically and ensemble-wise of the thematic material is not justifed by the ordinariness of the melody. An *Andante cantabile* follows. Many of Onslow's contemporaries argued that his slow movements were unsurpassed for their beauty and full range of feeling. While this particular movement cannot make that claim, it is not inferior. It is pretty, but lacks the depth of feeling one usually finds. Still, this ought not to be held against him, even Beethoven did not always "plumb the depths."



The most striking and unusual movement of the Quartet is its *Scherzo* in G Major, which bears the title *Il Cicalamento* in the Kistner edition. It is a canon introduced by the cello. (see above right) The second violin, then the viola and finally the first violin all take up the theme in turn. This is a very clever movement. Though soft and fast, it lacks the lightness of a Mendelssohnian Scherzo or like that found in his own Quartet No.18, Op.36 No.3. Instead there is a different sense of energy, equally captivating. The short middle section has a sycopated dragging theme which provides an adequate contrast to the main scherzo but it cannot really be counted as a trio section because of its brevity.

The finale, *Allegro grazioso* is a let down after the wonderful third

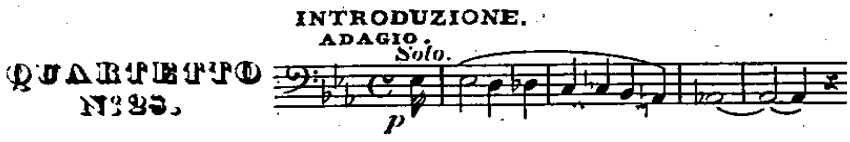


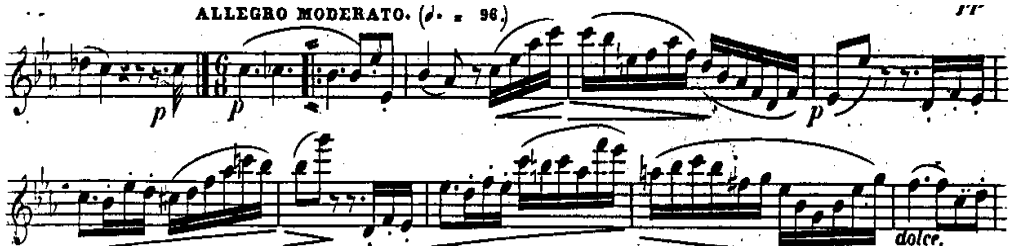
movement. The main theme, though graceful, is rather ordinary. A triplet motif, quite awkwardly written and hardly worth the effort to perfect, comes next. The closing has an etude quality to it and is certainly a lot weaker than his usual efforts. This was Onslow's 27th string quartet. Some were bound to be better than others. Some more ordinary than others. In my opinion, this was invariably the case with every composer who produced numerous works in one genre. While I have enjoyed playing this quartet, it certainly would not be among the first I would recommend to someone I wanted to convert to Onslow, nor would I take the effort to work it up for performance.

Onslow composed his 28th and 29th String Quartets, Opp.54 and 55 during the summer and fall of 1835. The 30th Quartet was written during the first part of 1836. All three quartets were published later that year by Kistner. As to Onlsow's life, during these months, there is little of note that appears to have occurred.

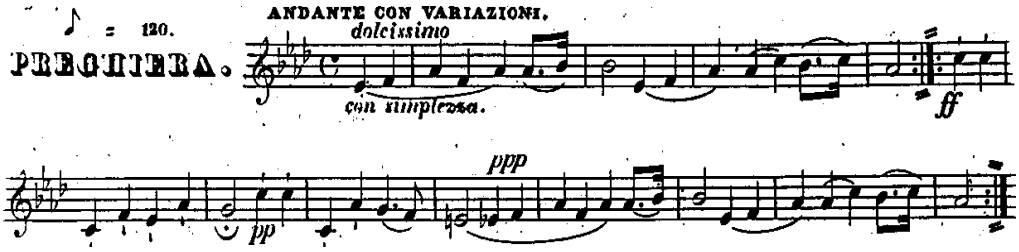
String Quartet No.28, Op.54 in E Flat was dedicated to a Monsieur Gosselin, a string instrument maker then active in Paris. It is thought that Onslow owned one of Gosselin's cellos, which were known for their excellent workmanship and tone. This quartet seems to have achieved a certain popularity both Berlin and Prague, the latter especially where Onslow's music was held in particularly high regard by Pixis, the music director there. Besides regularly

appearing with the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, at one particular festival in Prague, the Quartet appeared with a String Quintet for two cellos by Wenzel Veit, an Austro-Czech jurist turned musician. The program notes pointed out that Veit, whose music was then popular in its own right, had clearly been influenced by Onslow not only in his quintet's structure but also in its, "pleasing motifs, clarity of ideas, freshness and liveliness."The first movement of String Quartet No. 28 begins with a downwardly chromatic adagio *Introduzione* which like some soothsayer seems to give warning of impending doom. But Onslow surprises with a bright and lively *Allegro moderato.* This theme is passed around from voice to voice at different times but the lower voices are not always able to replicate the fleet-ness and light tread of the violins. The second subject is so closely aligned, and fits so well to the first, that its introduction is transparent. This is a showy movement with a lot of forward motion.

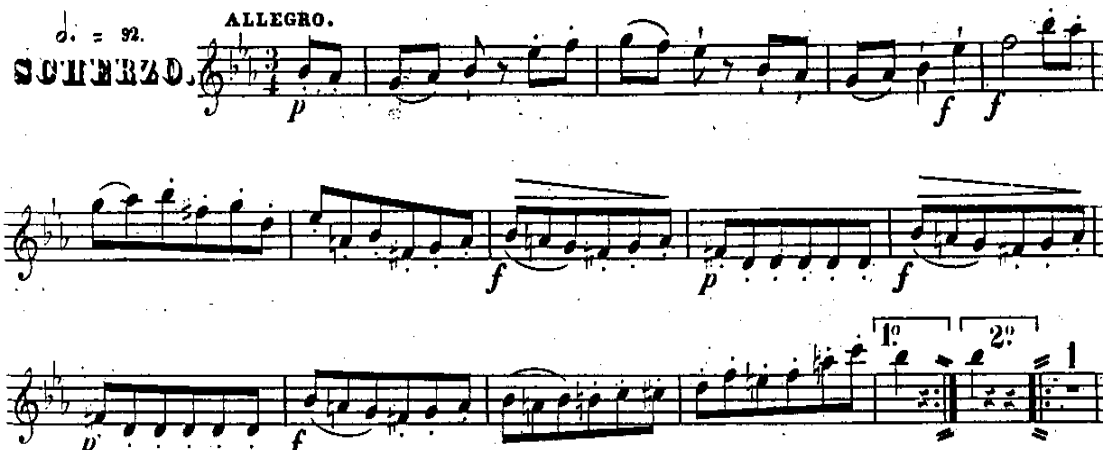




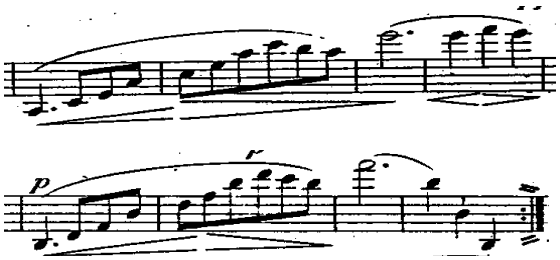
The second movement, *Preghiera, Andante con variazione*, begins with a lovely folk melody of child-like simplicity. Onslow, a master of this format, rarely fails to please. There are five short variations on the theme which are very well-related to each other. Each variation explores some aspect of the theme from a different perspective rather than merely providing a virtuosic interlude for this or that instrument. The final variation is particularly clever, featuring the melody by way of trill and ornament.

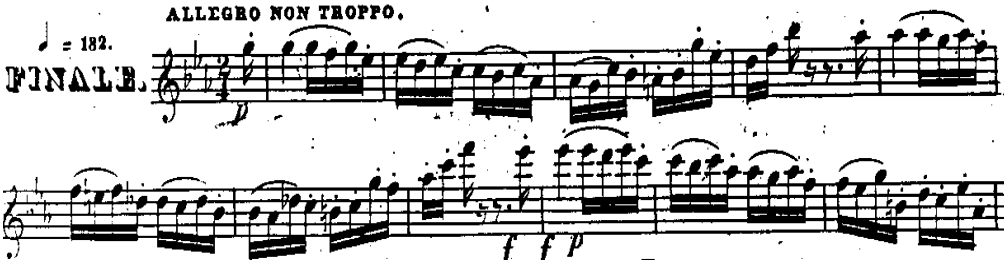


As is often the case with Onslow, the *Scherzo*, by its sheer elan, is the focal point for the entire quartet. The first violin introduces the exciting first subject and the whole movement takes off in a kind of perpetuo mobile. The thematic material is mostly split between the first violin and the cello with the middle voices providing a steady rhythmic tension. A rather dramatic trio section in which the

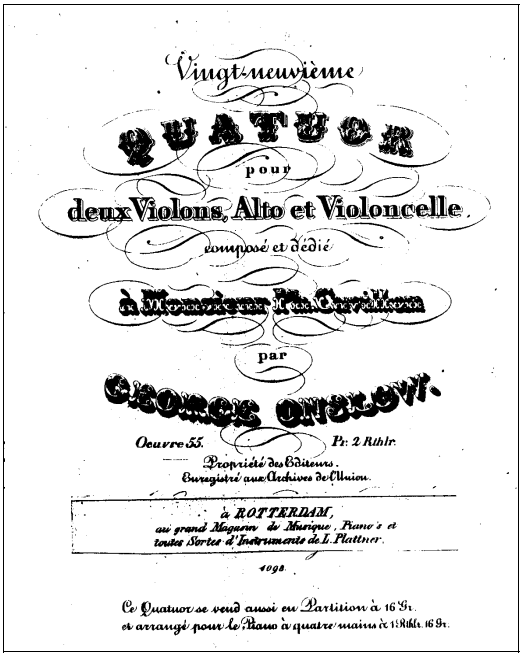


lower voices break loose follows. Though brief, it provides a striking contrast to the main section. First the cello plaintively calls out, going from its lowest to its tenor register. The viola answers in much the same way, finishing the phrase (example right)





The finale, *Allegro non troppo,* is a strange cross between its showy, virtuosic first theme and the commonplace, Biedermeieresque second theme. The movement opens, rocketing away, with the first violin taking the lead. A variation of this is passed between the voices with varying degrees of success. The second theme has a parlour-like innocuousness reminiscent of a warm summer afternoon on grandmother's antimacassar bedecked sofa. The ending to the movement is surprisingly predictable. While the inner movements to this Quartet are first rate, the outer movements are not. The problem, in my opinion, lies in the thematic material which is pedestrian despite the workmanlike way it is presented. Both movements might well have served as examples for Onslow's later critics who wrongly argued that his music is devoid of passion and "does not speak to us." While no one would argue that these movements are not tuneful and rhythmically attractive, the melodies with which they are clothed fall far below the standard of those in Opp.46 Nos.1-3 and Op.47. As such, this Quartet would not be one of the first of his I would suggest attempting to revive, although it can be recommended to amateurs without reservation.


Vingt-neuvième
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pour
deux Violons, Alto et Violoncelle
composé et dédié
à Monsieur Mr. le Chevallier Cuvillon
par
GEORGES ONSLOW.
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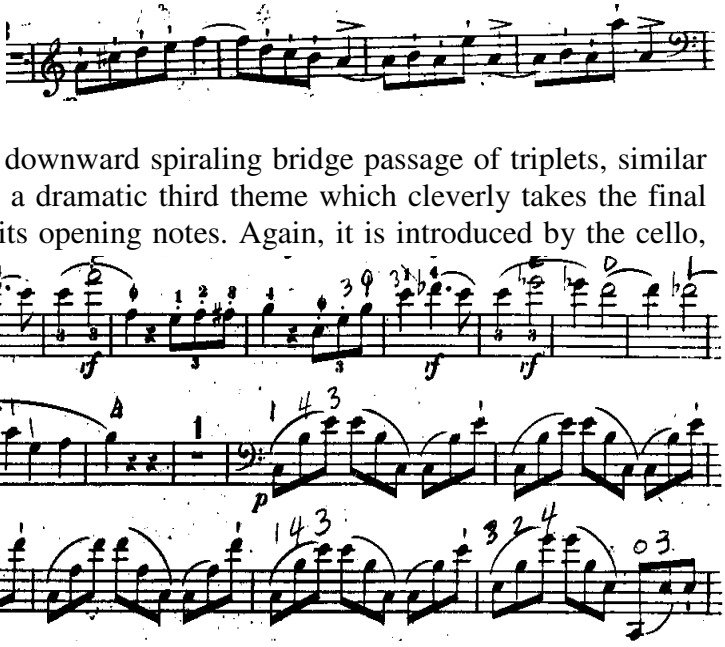
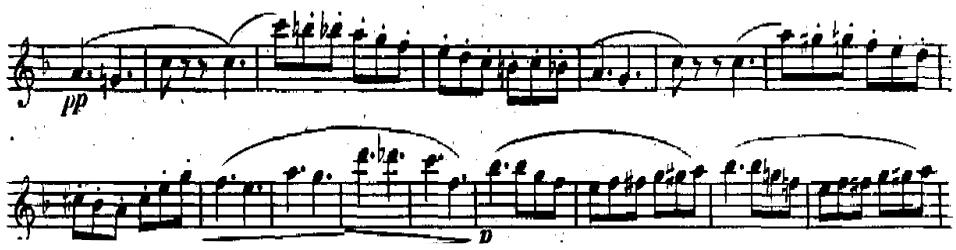
String Quartet No.29, Op.55 in d minor was composed in the autumn of 1835, shortly after No.28. It was dedicated to a Monsieur Cuvillon, a prominent Parisian violinist during the 1820's and 1830's. One can but wonder if Onlsow started right in on this Quartet immediately after finishing No.28 or if he waited some days or weeks. The contrast between the opening movement of No.29 and the finale of No.28 could hardly be greater.

The first movement to String Quartet No.29, *Allegro,* is so rich in thematic material, wonderful melodies and original effects, that there is almost too much to be found in just one movement. It begins with an echo dialogue between and the first violin and the viola. The opening theme sounds a distant warning of danger. (see top of next page)

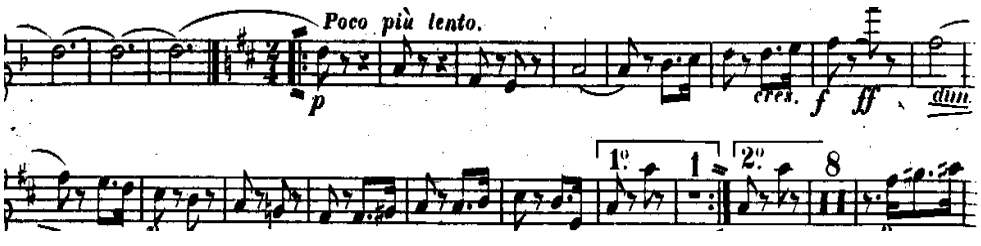
Rather than developing this promising subject, Onslow inserts a sudden downward bridge passage, leading immediately to the second theme, introduced by the cello high in its letenor register. (left) This theme is then taken up by the first violin at greater length but still without any real development. Then, once again, another downward spiraling bridge passage of triplets, similar to the earlier one, is inserted. It leads to a dramatic third theme which cleverly takes the final triplet of the bridge passage (below) as its opening notes. Again, it is introduced by the cello, and again quite high in the tenor register. When at last it is taken over to by violins, the cello is given a brief but striking arpeggio accompaniment. After this, another triplet bridge passage is used to return us to the first theme which is now welded to the second theme. The whole movement is pregnant with originality and excitement, including the very effective *ppp* ending in which the first theme surprisingly dies away.





Onslow follows this with one of his magnificent scherzos. The theme to the opening bars of this *Scherzo presto* is cut into snippets, divided between the voices. The main theme, in 6/8, is bright and full of energy. The second subject is just as exciting and full of energy as the first.

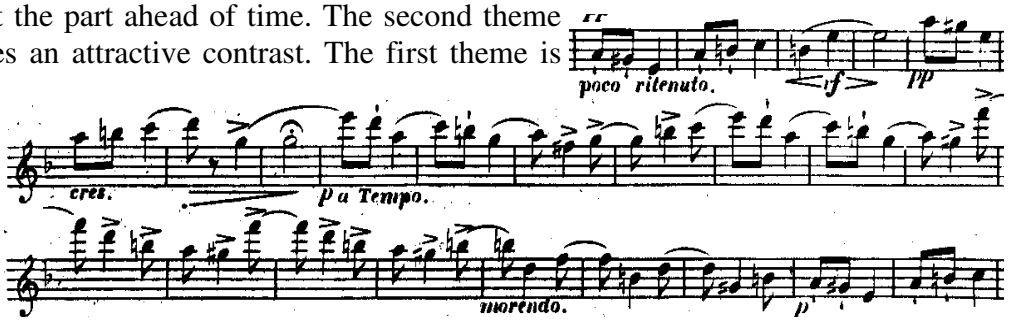
The trio, which is in 2/4, is ingeniously stitched to the scherzo by means of tied notes over the bar line. (left)



Slightly slower than the preceding section, the trio is one of Onslow's marvellous little stirring, military march-like themes.

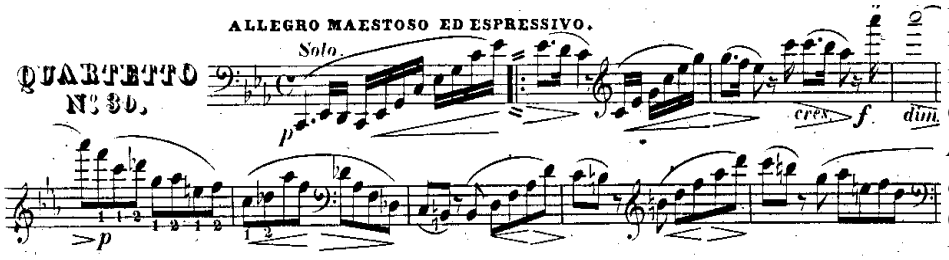
The scherzo is followed by an impressive *Adagio cantabile.* Although it is not noted as such in the music, it is actually a theme and variations. The theme, stated by the first violin, is reminiscent of a very beautiful Schubert lied. The first variation is a dramatic duet between the cello and first violin over tremolo in the middle voices. Later, the theme is restated against a long, but telling, leggerio passage of 16th notes in the cello. This is a captivating and wonderfully conceived movement.

It sometimes happens that composers are able to use a particular effect in a most telling and almost unique way. Certainly one sees this in Schubert's later string quartets with his original and very effective use of the tremolo. One notices the same thing with Onslow and his use of arpeggio-type passages. I can think of only one other important example (found in the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No.10, Op.74, *the Harp*) before Onslow started prominently using the arpeggio in the mid 1830's. The originality and effectiveness he was able to make of it is illustrated by the excitement generated from the opening theme, played by the first violin, in the finale, *Allegro vivace,* to Quartet No.29. (see left) Each voice is entrusted with this theme at various points in the movement, but it is worth noting that the cello's opportunity is somewhat more difficult than the others due to its placement in the treble clef. It is fair to say that many cellists will not be able to sight read some of the intricate passage work because of this, but the writing is not unviolinistic or technically beyond a good amateur player who has a moment to look at the part ahead of time. The second theme (see right) provides an attractive contrast. The first theme is then reintroduced and developed, bit by bit, first in one part than another, each time with tremendous energy and forward motion. And it is this theme with which Onslow brings the Finale to a thrilling close. According to Dr. Franks, Onslow's biographer, this Quartet remained in the repertoire of 19th Century performers longer than any of the others written at this time, and was still being played throughout Germany, Austria and Italy 30 years after it was published. It is a first rate quartet from start to finish and deserves to be revived by professional groups and can, at the same time, be recommended to amateur players of good standard.

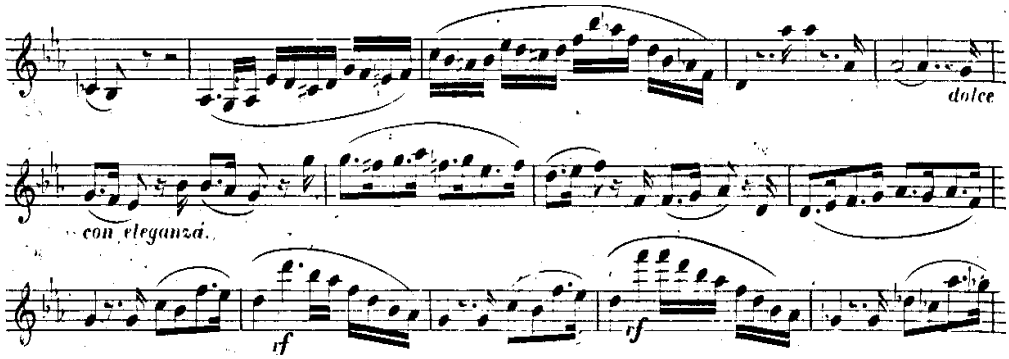


String Quartet No.30, Op.56 in c minor was finished shortly before Easter of 1836. It was dedicated to (Pierre) Alexander Chevillard, a well-known Parisian cellist who helped to introduce Beethoven's Late Quartets to the French public. This Quartet is unquestionably a

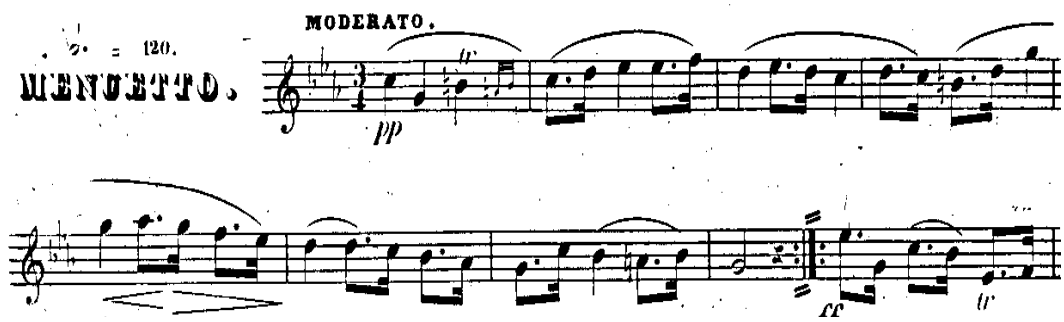
masterwork which deserves to be and remain in the repertoire of today's performing quartets. There is a wonderful recording of this work, superbly performed by the Coull Quartet on an ASV CD DCA 808 which I strongly recommend to readers. (Also on disk is Onslow's Quartet



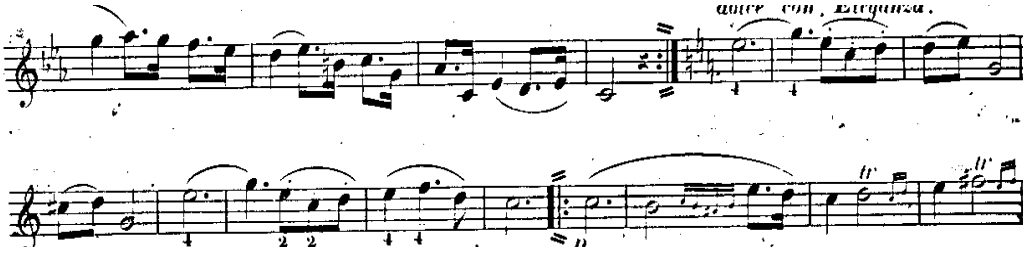
No.19, Op.46 No.1 in f# minor, another masterpiece) Of the opening bars to the *Allegro maestoso ed espressivo* of String Quartet No.30, I know of nothing like them in the quartet literature: The sheer drama of the cello solo (example above), as it ascends from the depths of the open c string to an A flat, nearly four octaves above it, is breathtaking. The first violin takes this up and starts to develop it, before introducing the gentler second theme, which rhythmically is cleverly stolen from the cadence of the first melody. (left) Against this lovely and somewhat operatic theme,



Onslow uses a soft, arpeggio accompaniment in the cello, as a harmonic underpinning. Played properly, it should just be loud enough to be heard but not noticed, and as indicated, *leggiermente*. Ignoring the dynamics and style will spoil the wonderful effect. Only toward the very end of the movement does Onslow use the arpeggio prominently for a moment as an introduction to the coda.

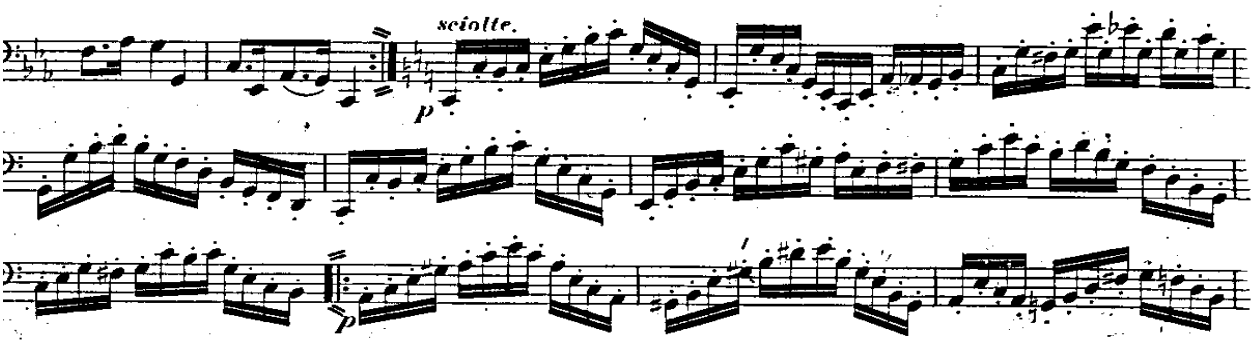


He follows this up with a very unusual *Menuetto*. Marked *moderato*, the lovely first theme (above) is somewhat nostalgic and unhurried. The main theme of the trio section is equally fine and is similar in feel to the minuet. (left)



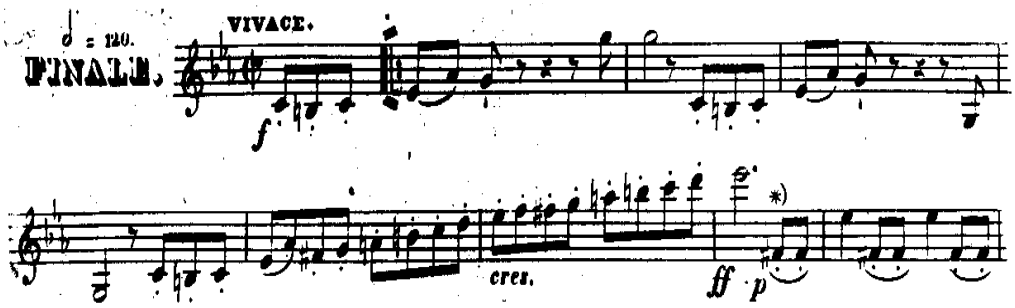
Against this, however, the

cello is given long running 16th note scale passages. (see below) They are to played softly and *sciolte*, i.e. nimbly, no elephants tromping here!



The minuet and trio sections are each played once more before the coda in which the first violin suddenly seizes the scale passage from the cello, in mid-phrase as it were, playing it forte before leading the others to the soft and charming conclusion. Very finely conceived.

The third movement, *Adagio cantabile e sostenuto*, is written on a large scale, similar to what one encounters in one of Beethoven's Middle Quartets. The main theme is a long and tranquil song, which again is reminiscent of Schubert's very lovely songs. The gentleness of the music gives it an almost lullaby-like quality. There are many rhythmic intricacies and the development is very completely thought out. Clearly, Onslow lavished much attention on it and as the movement closes, a quiet sense of peace descends upon the listener. And then——an explosion!



Sudden, heart-stopping and powerful, the *Finale, vivace,* springs forth without warning. (left) The music hurtles forward, lurching about without any real development until Onslow slips into the second theme, a rapid but joyful subject. This, too, is not really developed before the introduction of a slower third theme which provides a good contrast to the two preceding melodies. There is yet a fourth theme, lyrical but syncopated and accompanied by a soft arpeggio background in the cello. The conclusion, which in part shows some of Beethoven's influence, is exciting and well done. Here words are not really not enough to describe the excellence of the music. The Quartet can stand comparison with anything being written at the time.

Onslow in 1837 (age 53) the year he became a member of the Legion d' Honneur

After completing String Quartet No.30 in the spring of 1836, Onslow did not return to the genre again for at least three years. During this time, however, he did remain quite busy and his reputation as a composer of chamber music continued to grow. In the summer of 1836, he was named an

honorary member of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, without doubt the most celebrated musical institution of its type in Europe. Founded in Vienna in 1813, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Society of the Friends of Music) supervised a renowned conservatory, owned an extensive music library, and had as its primary objective the promotion of contemporary music. To this end, it periodically recognized outstanding composers for their contributions. Honored at the same time as Onslow were Ferdinand Ries and the French opera composers, Meyerbeer and Auber. In the spring of 1837, Onslow was admitted to the Legion d'Honneur "in recognition of his international reputation and achievement in the field of instrumental music."

"The Leading Modern Dramatic Composers of the Day" This lithograph appeared in 1838 and was published in an important French periodical. Standing (from l. to r.) are: Berlioz, Donizetti, Onslow, Auber, Mendelssohn & Berton. Seated (from l. to r.) are: Halevy, Meyerbeer, Spontini and Rossini.

Hence, though his reputation continued to grow, it was primarily among chamber music lovers. But the French general musical public, and that of Paris in particular, for the most part had little enthusiasm for this art form and with them, Onslow's reputation remained muted. For them the theater was of primary interest and the only sure way for a composer to gain their attention and fame was through opera.

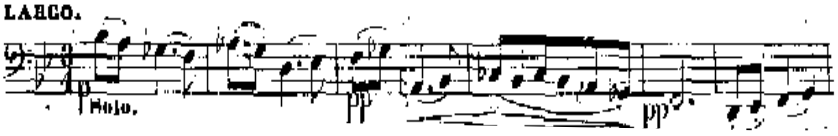
Thus it was, Onslow once again set about to write an opera. The subject was from a famous episode in French history, the murder of the Duke of Guise in 1588. Entitled *Duc de Guise,* the opera premiered in 1837 with some success. Berlioz, for example, wrote that it was, "one of the most beautiful glories of France," and went on to describe Onslow as a "rare talent."

Nonetheless, despite some 20 performances within three months of the premiere, it suddenly disappeared and was judged a failure. There were several causes, most beyond Onslow's control (such as the sudden resignation of important cast members), but there also was the undeniable fact that the opera's subject matter hardly seemed suitable for the Opera Comique. The overture to *Guise*, as was the case with his other opera, remained popular long after the rest of the music sank to oblivion. Unfortunately *Guise's* failure came at a bad time and probably cost Onslow a chance for a seat on the prestigious Academie des Beaux-Arts as well as a professorship at the Conservatoire. In both instances, he lost out to the Italian comic opera composer, Michel Carafa, whose music died long before he did and of whom Rossini said, "He made the mistake of being born my contemporary."

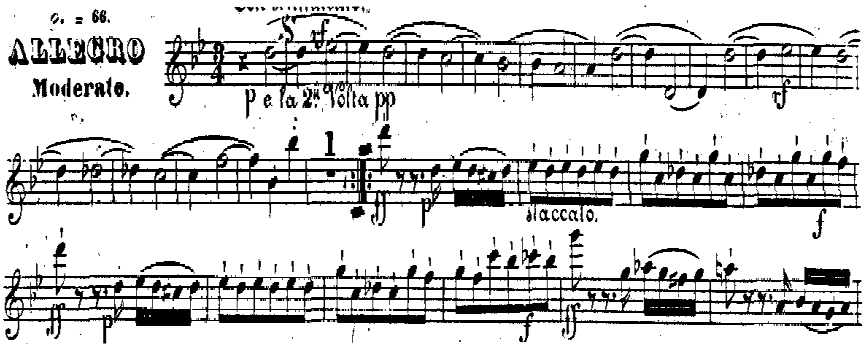
After the failure of *Guise*, Onslow spent more time away from Paris. In 1838, he composed a string quintet, No.25, Op.61. His American biographer, Dr Franks, states that there is evidence Onslow also completed a string quartet sometime during the summer of 1839 which would have been Op.60. It was, in fact a suite for string quartet based on themes from *Guise.* In 2005, a recording of this heretofore unknown work was made by the French quartet, A Prima Vista. It is not clear if it was ever published.

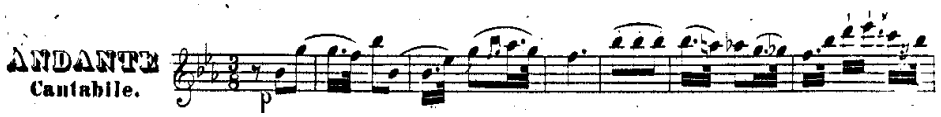
In July of 1839, Onslow was also elected a member of the Academy of St. Cecilia, the most important musical institution of its type in Italy. Between 1839 and 1841, Onslow devoted himself and helped to found an orchestra, the Societe Philharmonique de Clermont-Ferrand, in his local Department. In addition to his involvement with the orchestra, Onslow, at this time, lost ownership to Chalendras, the family chateau, in a court dispute with his brothers. He then undertook to build a new residence, Bellerive, a few miles away. All of this activity may explain that between 1839 and 1842, Onslow wrote only three works, all of them string quartets.

String Quartet No.31, Op.62 in B flat Major was completed early in the summer of 1841. It was dedicated to M. Beaulieu, a French violinist and composer active in the French provinces. Published in 1842, it was performed in Vienna and Prague with success but did not seem to enter the repertoire. The work features a slow introduction, *Largo*, with a chromatically descending passage first heard in the cello. Onslow was fond of this device and used it often, invariably with great success, as a means of building tension, suspense or drama for the fast movement to follow. Mozart's Quartet No.19, *The Dissonant, K.465* is perhaps the most famous early example of this kind of introduction. Beethoven was also partial to this means of beginning and used it on several occasions as early as his Op.18 right through to his final quartets. Onslow first used a slow introduction in Quartet No.4, Op.8 No.1 composed around 1810. While there is Beethovian suspense and uneasiness in this introduction, the main theme of the *Allegro grazioso,* stated by the first violin, while hardly cheerful, is not one of tragedy or intense drama, but a syncopated near restatement of the opening bars of the *Largo* in major. The part writing is very good although tricky at times. A martial bridge passage leads to a lovely second theme. Written on a large scale, this is a very fine movement.



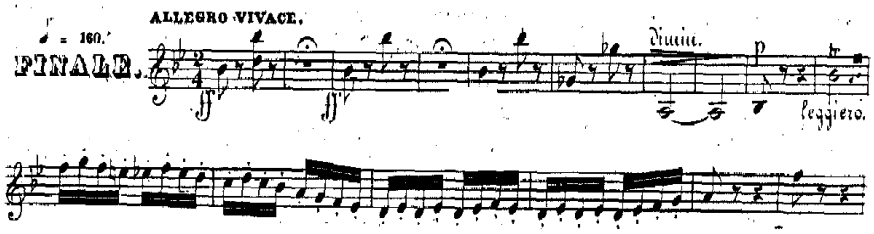
The second movement, *Allegro moderato*, is in 3/4. Syncopated, it begins with a charming waltz but then charges ahead transmogrifying into a somewhat Mendelssohnian scherzo. (see example at top of the next page) In the trio, which provides a fine contrast, the first violin and cello sing a calmer, sustained Lied, supported seamlessly by the inner voices, before a recapitulation. Here is a movement of great artistic merit, it sounds as if it must have just come flowing out from his pen effortlessly.

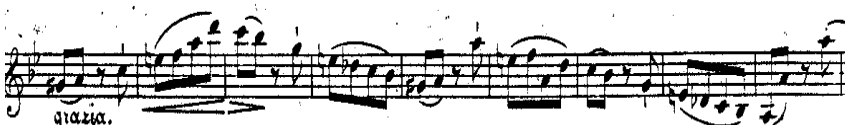




A big *Andante Cantabile,* provides the center of gravity for this quartet. The very beautiful opening theme is first voiced by the cello high in its tenor register and then taken up by all. Intricately woven together and spanning the full range of musical emotions, including two stormy episodes, it is one of the finest slow movements Onslow wrote and easily the match of anything written from this period by anyone.

After the Andante sweetly dies away *ppp,* Onslow breaks his listeners' reverie with the finale, *Allegro vivace assai.* It begins with two powerful *ff* chords, followed by a grand pause. Again two loud chords are sounded followed by a fermata rest. Then again come the crashing chords, which this time usher in a wild chase, played *pp*. This ingenious music has a transparent, gauze-like quality to it. As usual, the part writing is good. Onslow seems to have improved on Mendelssohn in that the rapid sections given to the lower voices do not produce the miscalculated growling effect one gets in the last movement of Mendelssohn's Octet or in the Canzonetta section to his Op.12 Quartet. The second theme, (see right) lyrical and broad, provides a perfect contrast to what comes before. The music has a light, heavenly quality. The surprise pizzicato ending is remarkably effective. This is a master quartet. It is only of medium difficulty, from both a technical and ensemble standpoint. It belongs in the concert hall and should seriously be examined by professionals as well as amateurs who also will get great pleasure from it. Unfortunately, it is out of print and has not been recorded.

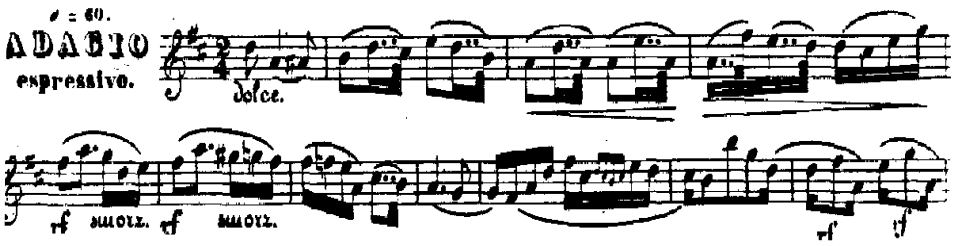




Onslow completed **String Quartet No.32 in b minor, Opus 63** immediately after Quartet No.31. Dedicated to the famous French violinist, Delphin Alard, this quartet was performed several times in Paris after it was published. The main theme of the opening movement, *Allegro*

risoluto e maestoso, is a curious blend; first spacious and broad, then hurried with rushing scale passages. From the recurring last three notes of the final scale passage, Onslow ingeniously creates the second theme. Both themes eventually collide in a dramatic *tutta forza* section toward the close of the movement with the second theme winning out but nonetheless itself dying away *pp.*

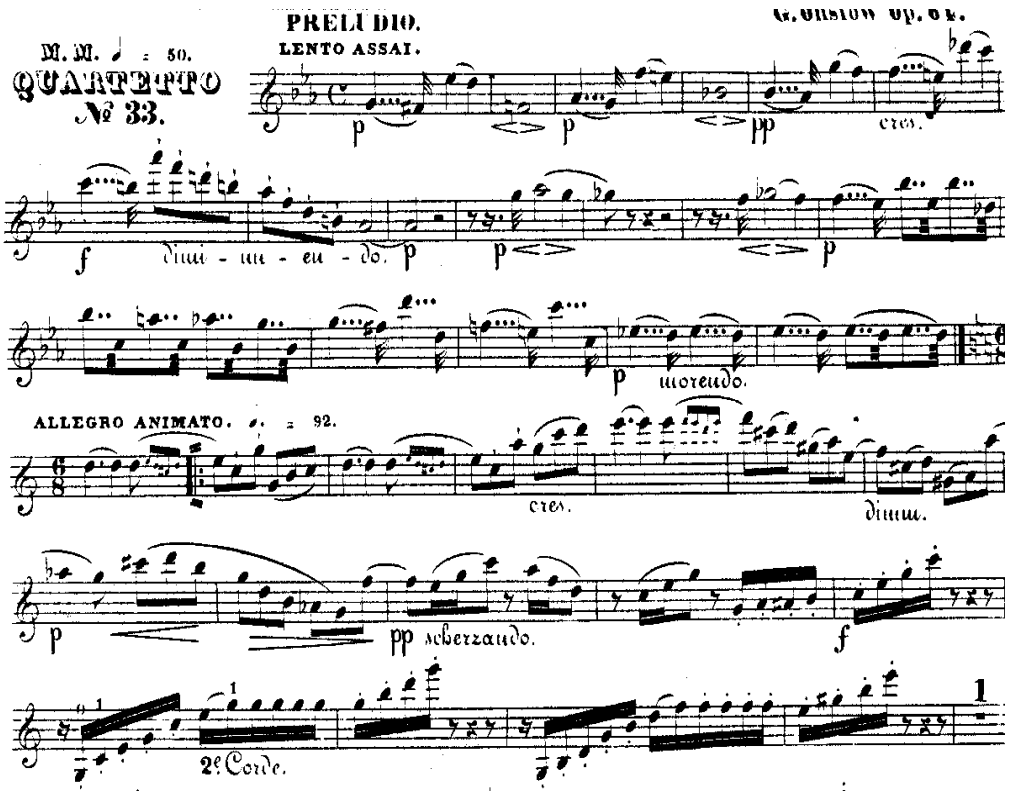
A brilliant *Scherzo vivace*, in G Major comes next. Bits of the main theme are tossed about between all of the voices. Hand-offs must be precise for the music to be effective. A brief trio section, *Allegretto semplice e legatissimo,* in 2/4 consisting mainly of half notes in all the voices provides a good contrast and is used to conclude the movement after the scherzo is reintroduced.



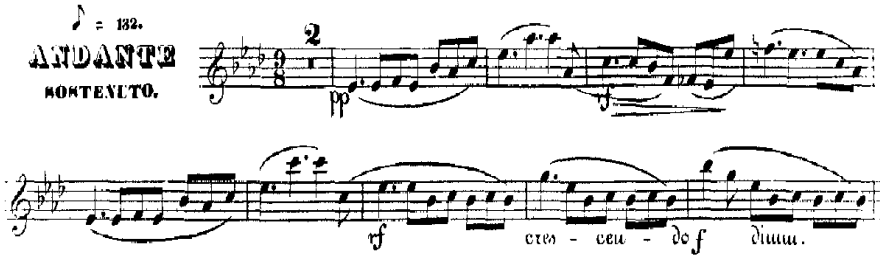
Perhaps the strongest movement of this quartet is the massive *Adagio espressivo*. The lovely opening theme is introduced by the first violin and then given to the cello. As the movement progresses, it becomes rhythmically quite intricate with all of the voices given important opportunities. Onslow interrupts the tranquil mood of the Adagio twice with very dramatic episodes marked *con energia.*

In the finale, *Allegro moderato*, the cello introduces the march-like main theme. The violin restates it and immediately goes into the second subject, a long triplet passage. It is only later that Onslow returns and fully develops the first theme and then, later yet, blends the two cleverly using one as a kind of counterpoint to the other. In the exciting concluding bars, played tutta forza, the cello and first violin echo bits of the first theme back and forth over the pulsing triplet accompaniment of the inner voices. This is also a good quartet, alas, also out of print and unrecorded.

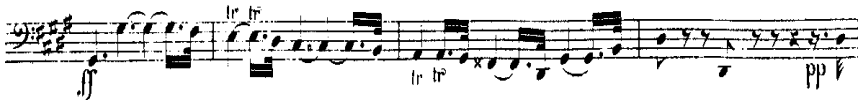
Onslow began work on **String Quartet No.33, Op.64 in C** in the autumn of 1841. However, his mother's death in January 1842 and his subsequent candidacy again for a place on the Academie des Beaux Arts following Cherubini's death in March 1842 interrupted his work. Dedicated to Eugene Sauzay, another well-known French violinist, this quartet remained popular longer, especially in Germany, than Nos.31 and 32. It begins with a foreboding *Preludio, Lento Assai* in minor. However the main section, *Allegro animato,* is sunny and playful. The opening theme is based on a turn. The second theme, consisting of scale passages

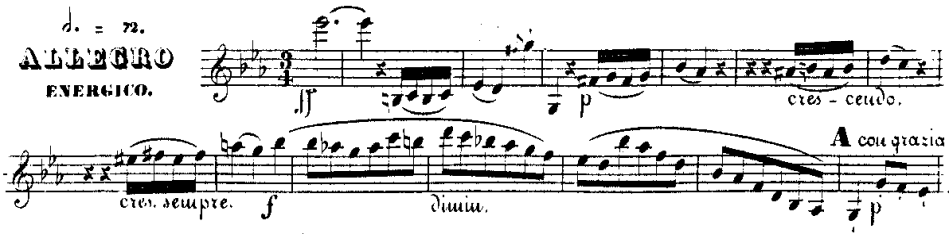


which fall under the hand comfortably, is a little tricky rhythmically. It requires precise execution, as it is passed from voice to voice, to be effective. Though light in mood, this is a substantial movement.



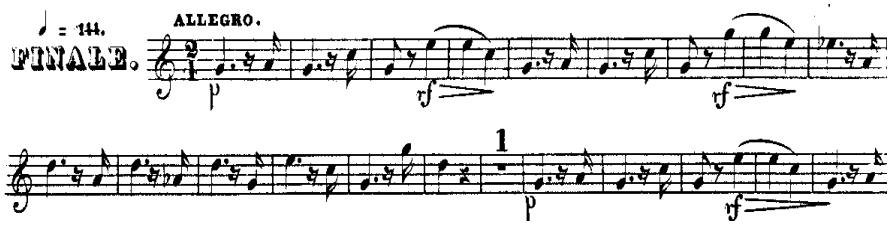
The following *Andante sostenuto* is an absolute gem. The lovely pastoral main theme in A Flat Major is given to the first violin, which is entrusted to spin forth a seamless melody over a subtle accompaniment in the other voices. A turbulent and dramatic middle section in g# minor follows in which the cello belts out a theme *a la basso*.





A scherzo, *Allegro energico*, in c minor begins with a Halloween-like first theme. This, without further development, gives way to the second subject which is martial in nature. The trio, in C Major, provides great contrast with a quiet, flowing 8th note melody in the first violin and later the cello. It conjures the image of water flowing lazily through a small channel.

In the finale, *Allegro*, we have one of Onslow's great '*La Chasse*' movements. Above the viola's soft 16th note backdrop, the 1st violin sings the dramatic main theme which is finished with a kind of triplet 'cymbal crash' in the cello. One feels forward motion immediately. Again there is no development but the introduction of a march-like second theme without bridge section. When the opening theme is then restated by the cello, the first violin accompanies with 3 octave rising scale passages. Eventually this is made into a third theme. In the cello, we again find the soft arpeggio passages which Onslow started to regularly use beginning with Quartet No.29. But here they remain in the background. As we reach the coda, the first violin begins by softly singing the opening theme against rushing chromatic scale passages played by the viola and cello in their lower registers. Except for a brief crescendo, the music keeps getting softer and softer appearing to die away before the final triumphant concluding chords. This is yet another a mature work, satisfying in everyway. It deserves to be in the professional's repertoire but is still accessible to amateurs and belongs in the front rank of the composer's quartets. There is no recording but a modern reprint of the original Kistner



edition was made by the Hungarian firm Rara Avis Reprint Sorozat and was available in the music shops of Budapest, however, it did not appear in the West.

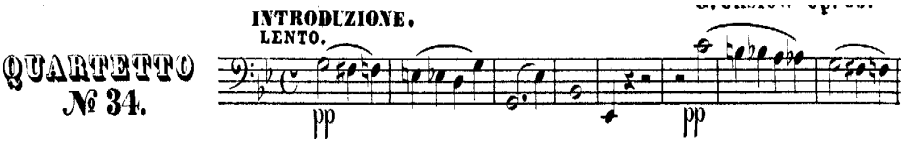
By 1842, Onslow's reputation was reaching its zenith, not only in Germany, Austria and England, but also at last in France. Concert programs from this period indicate that his works were being performed regularly in all of the major cities of the above countries. Furthermore, many arrangements of his works, especially for piano, had been made and were available in music shops for amateurs. In France at this time, Onslow was regularly placed in the first rank of composers for chamber music and nowhere was he held in higher esteem than in Paris. He had unquestionably become one of the leading figures of Parisian musical life and as such could be considered one of the leading contenders for the next vacant seat at the Institut de France or more correctly the section of the Institut known as the Academie de Beaux-Arts. That vacancy occurred in March of 1842 with the death of Cherubini, who had been the senior member of the Academie. To be elected as his replacement was then held to be the highest honor obtainable by a musician. For a number of reasons, the election did not actually take place until some 7 months later. All through the summer, newspapers speculated that the main contenders were Berlioz, Adolphe Adam, Ambrose Thomas and Onslow. The names of these composers had been submitted immediately as the most worthy. But as the summer wore on, dozens of other names of lesser composers were also submitted out of respect for their accomplishments. French newspapers in various editorials often wrote in favor of Onslow, so much so, that several friends of the composer asked the papers to back off for fear that this would have a negative affect on his election chances. From the long list, four names were finally submitted to the members of the Institute: Adam, Thomas, Onslow and Desire-Alexandre Batton, a then popular opera composer. On the first ballot from the 36 electoral votes Adam received 18, Onslow 17, Batton 1 and Thomas none. In the runoff between Onslow and Adam, Onslow received the vote that had gone to Batton and one which had gone to Adam and thus was elected to Cherubini's seat on the Institut.

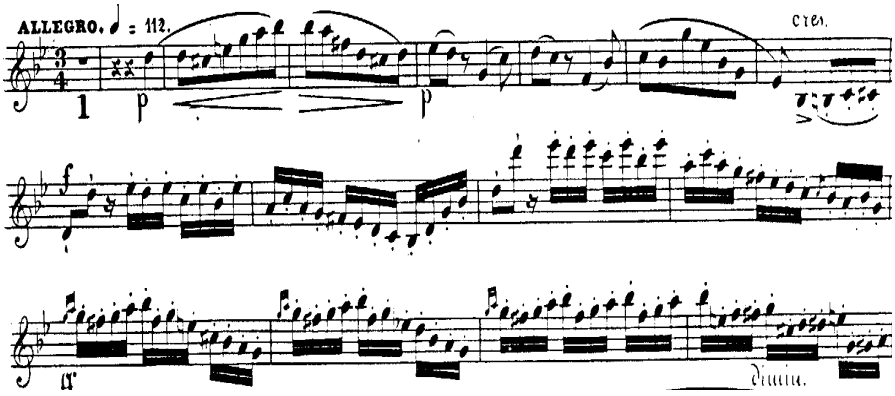
The election to the Institut marked the beginning of the final phase of Onslow's life in that, for the first time, he had official duties which included attending weekly meetings and serving on several commissions as well as participating in the supervision of the Prix d'Rome. While it has been noted by other biographers that Onslow had been elected to replace Cherubini as head of the Conservatoire, this is inaccurate. Auber was given that position after Cherubini resigned due to health reasons. Nonetheless, Onslow was frequently involved in the affairs of the Conservatoire although he neither taught as a professor nor served as its director.

Of the various commissions upon which Onslow sat, perhaps the most famous was that charged with the responsibility of reorganizing French military music. Formed in 1844, other members included Auber, Spontini, and Halevy. The major issue confronting the commission was whether to approve the use of Adolph Sax's new invention, the saxophone, by army bands. The commission was asked to act speedily so that Sax could obtain a patent and furnish the instruments to the French army. It was greatly feared that if the instruments were first acquired by the

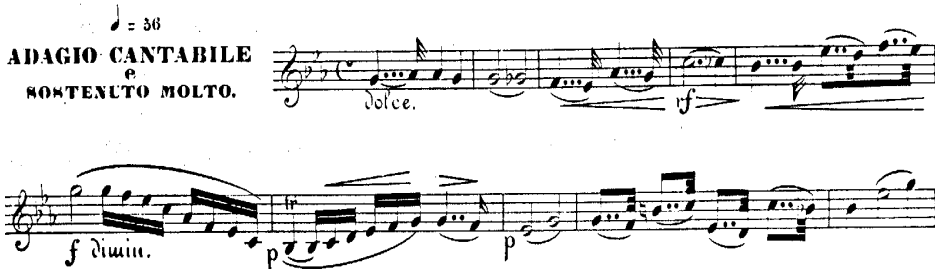
Prussians, Austrians or Russians that France would lose what was then considered its superiority in military music.

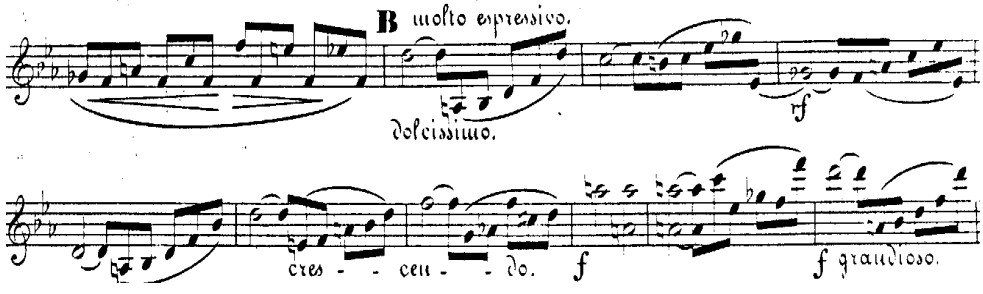
Onslow began work on **String Quartet No.34, Op.65 in g minor** in the summer of 1843 and completed it by the autumn. It is dedicated to Charles Dancla, a student of Baillot, and one of France's most famous violin virtuosos. It is known that the Quartet was popular immediately after it was published and performed at a special festival in Cologne during the Spring of 1846. From the general format of this Quartet as well as that of No.35, it appears Onslow's schematic thinking had changed little from when he wrote the preceding three quartets. He begins with a downwardly chromatic *Introduzione, Lento* first stated by the cello (see above) and then taken up by the others: While there is no great sense of impending tragedy, the Lento does create uneasiness which builds in tension to a *ff* before dying away. The kernel, or first three measures, to the opening theme of the *Allegro* is given to the cello, but the rest is completed by the first violin, which very quickly becomes quite busy. (right) The second theme is syncopated but not well-developed. The conclusion to the movement is effective. The only criticism I have of this movement is the florid first violin part.



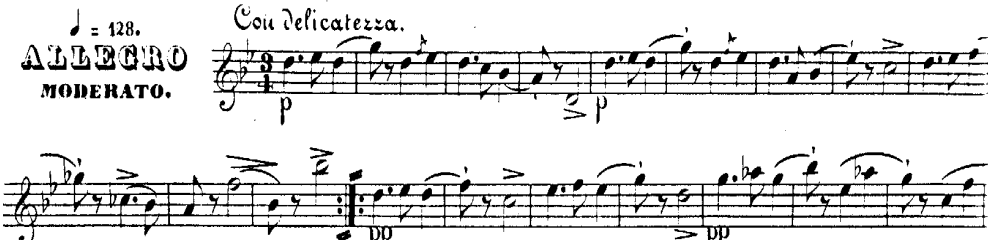


The second movement, *Adagio cantabile, sostenuto molto,* is perhaps the showcase of the Quartet. It begins in the style of a bucolic idyll. The music rolls along peacefully with a sense of poetic beauty until the second theme is introduced. Based on a triplet motif, it begins quietly enough but then builds to a climax. (right) Against this, the bottom three voices play tremolo. Perhaps the other voices might have been

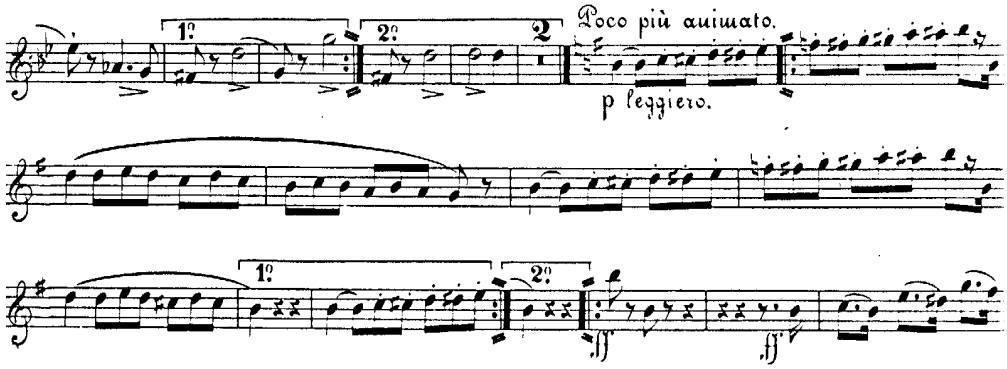


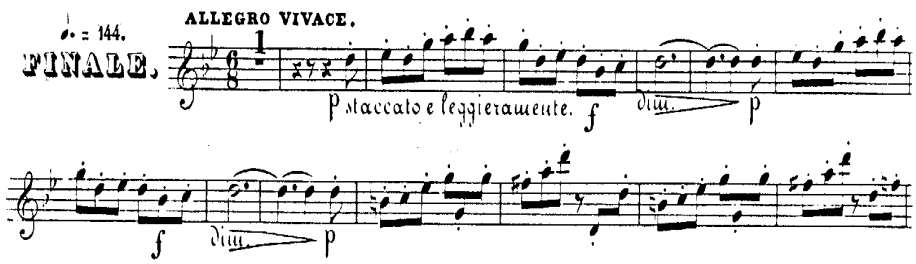


given more of a role in the presentation of the lovely melodies but they are used so effectively that it seems somewhat petty to carp.

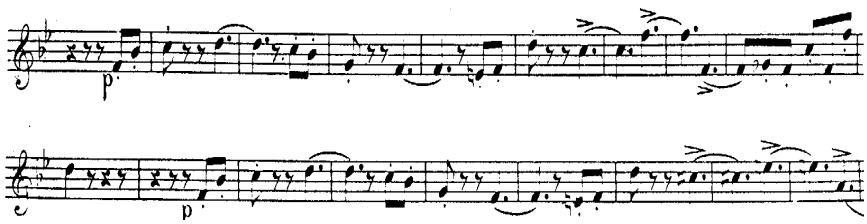


The third movement, *Allegro moderato,* begins with an unusual and rhythmically tricky theme of the sort to which Onslow was often drawn. However, as the tempo indicates, it is fairly relaxed and lacks the normal excitement one finds in opening bars to most Onslow scherzos. It is the trio section that has the excitement. Played slightly faster than the main section, at first it rushes forward with a set of chromatic triplets but then gently collapses. In the second section to the trio, the music finally takes off. (left) This leads to the recapitulation.

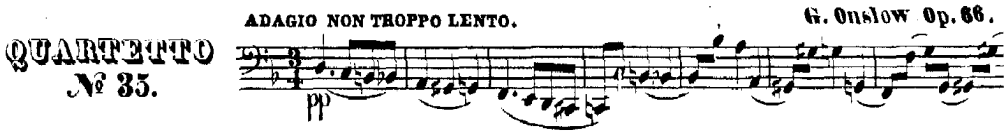




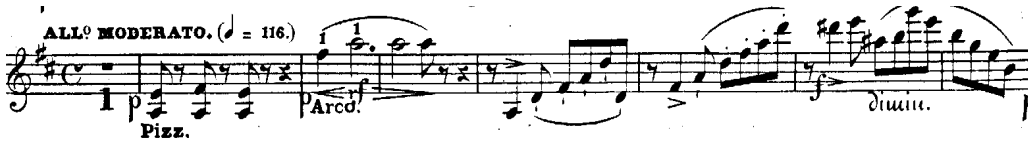
The finale, *Allegro vivace* is one of those galloping 6/8 affairs full of excitement with the inner voices given repeated 8th notes, *staccato leggiero,* to keep up the tension while the outer voices charge ahead. The second theme has a very Italian quality to it and sounds like a distant cousin to one of the themes in Wolf's *Italian Serenade*. (see right) Who knows, perhaps Wolf heard this quartet. It provides excellent contrast without losing any of the excitement that the first theme generated. Toward the end, Onslow has the cello play an arpeggio background of the sort we found in Opp.55 and 56. When it comes to endings, Onslow rarely disappoints. The coda leads to a satisfying conclusion. To sum up, though not a masterpiece, I think this is a very good quartet which deserves to be heard. Amateurs will undoubtedly enjoy making this work's acquaintance but will want a technically self-assured first violinist.

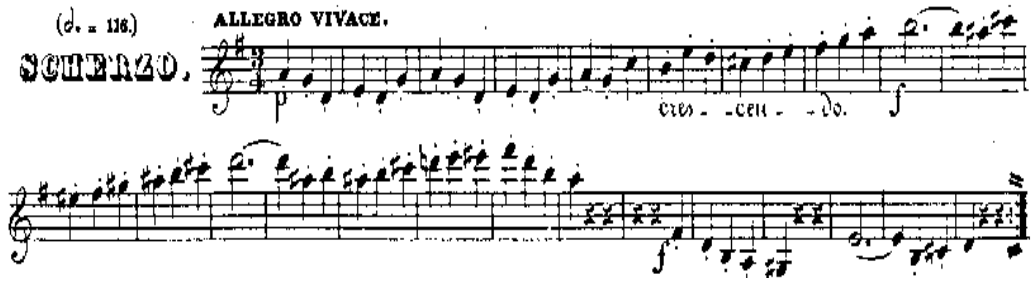


String Quartet No.35, Op.66 in D was begun immediately after No.34 and was completed in late 1843. It is dedicated to Louis Javault a well-known and much-admired soloist and quartet performer at that time. This quartet appears to have achieved great popularity both during Onslow's lifetime and after. Performed in Russia with success, the 35th entered the repertoire of the Müller Brothers Quartet, the premiere quartet ensemble before the public at that time. It was also performed at concerts given by the Société de Quatuors Français during the 1860's and 70's. The Société de Quatuors Français was formed with the sole purpose of performing important string quartets which had been composed within the past 30 years.

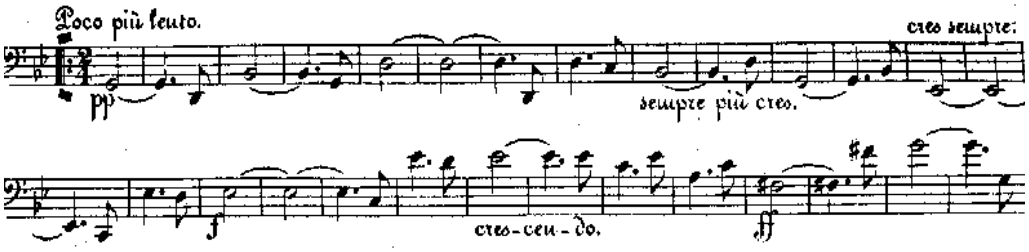


Onslow once again begins with a slow chromatic, descending, introduction, *Adagio non troppo lento*. And again, it is the cello which states the theme. As usual, the minor creates a sense foreboding which the following *Allegro moderato* does not entirely dispel, even though it is in D Major . The main theme (right) is quite original. In what might be called a 'stutter stop' opening, each voice is successively given an ascending quarter note and dotted half while the others play pizzicato chords. The triple repetition of this might be likened to a car being driven by someone learning how to use a manual transmission for the first time——a little bit forward, a little bit forward, but at last, the first violin takes it away. This is a very good movement although there are some tricky 16th note scale passages, especially in the violin.

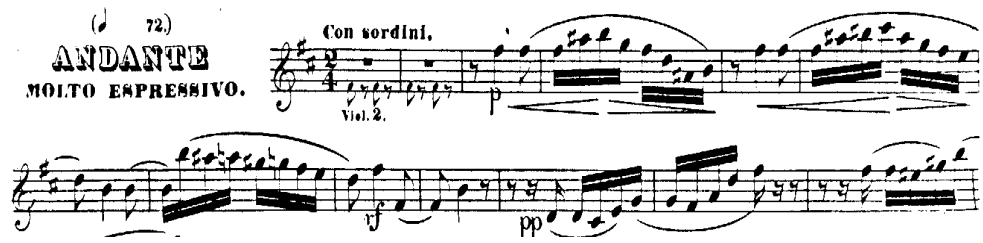




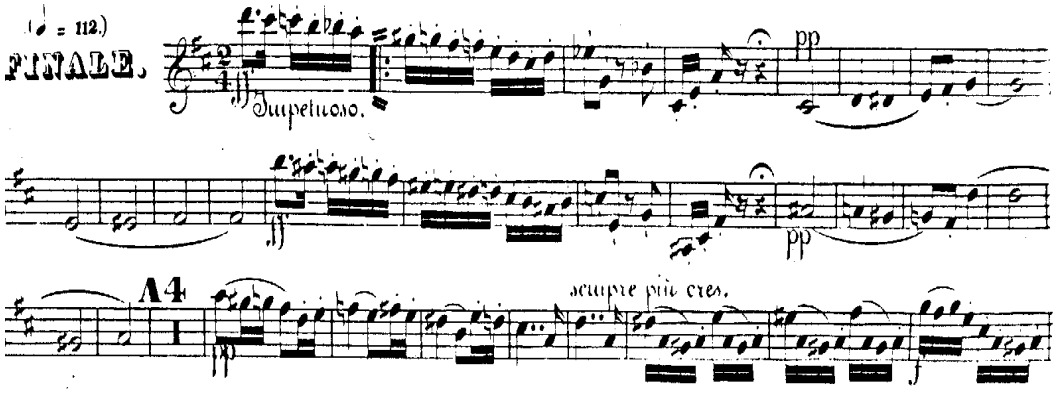
The *Scherzo, Allegro vivace* is extraordinarily well put together. Its excellence makes it a candidate to serve as a proto-type for Onslow's late scherzos. The opening theme, entrusted to the first violin, is light and rushes forward softly *p* like the wind. The development section, led by the cello is both powerful and thrusting but later again gives way to the whirlwind. The short trio, which however appears several times, is an effective and dramatic basso solo of the sort one finds in the opera. The cello, who alone is in 2/4, begins in a whisper while the others, still in 3/4, play six 8th notes to a bar, which because of the 2 against 3 creates a tremolo effect. Meanwhile, the theme, begun deep in the cello's bass register, slowly begins to climb. (left) Tension and dynamics rise as well. The recapitulation appears to be taking the move-



ment to its close when without warning, it is interrupted by the ominous theme from the trio, this time played by the first violin, *forte grandioso*. Rising to what appears to be a decisive resolution, it instead turns back and fades away *pp* pizzicato. Three measures of rest follow. Only the players know the movement is not finished. Then softly and *presto*, the viola begins to whisper the first theme. Onward in dynamics and speed, the scherzo rushes to its powerful finish.



A moody and marvelous *Andante molto sostenuto* stands in stark contrast to the high spirits of the *Scherzo.* The effect is rather like a unexpected tragedy occurring amid great gaiety; as if the host of a boisterous celebration suddenly fell dead. Against the soft pizzicati in the lower voices, the muted first violin dolefully sings a melancholy and haunting theme. Onslow briefly brightens the mood from the *pathetic* of b minor to B Major with a short, chorale-like middle section, which is still somber but hopeful. This is but one of many movements which plumb the depths of emotion and are in every way equal to the emotionally charged movements of Mozart and Beethoven. Readers of this work by now know this, and it is astonishing that Woollett in his article on Onslow in *Cobbett's Cyclopedia* could write, "*...his ideas are unemotional."* I believe Cobbett (who wrote a long, historically inaccurate and abysmal addenda to the article) himself would blanche in shame if shown his words after hearing this movement or dozens of others like it. He wrote, "... *there is an absence of deep feeling in his slow movements which accounts for the oblivion into which his chamber music has fallen..."* This is absolute rubbish! Shame on you Mr. Cobbett.

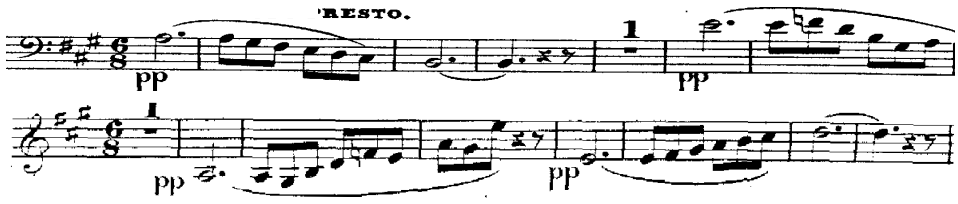


Readers will not believe me when I write that I am almost at a loss for words to the describe the excellence of the finale, marked *Allegretto*, Onslow begins with an attention-getting downward plunging chromatic passage, played in unison twice. (see above)

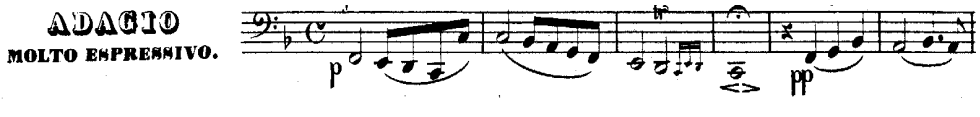
One might expect 'all hell to break loose' after this kind of an introduction, but the first theme is quite congenial. However as the movement proceeds, a great deal of excitement and lively dialogue occurs. The opening downward attention-getter reappears in several guises——as development, bridge passage and at one point as a bit of a third theme. The part writing is superb and the music simply bubbles over with ideas. The unexpected ending, though piano, is very ef-

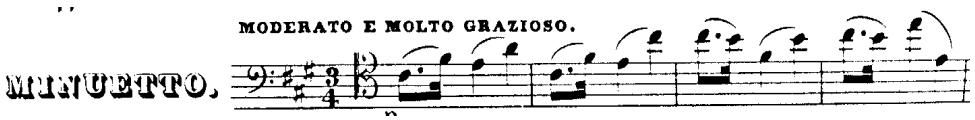
fective. This movement is, as is the entire quartet, an absolute gem. It should be in print. It is first rate from start to finish. Within the grasp of competent amateurs, any professional quartet which puts this work on the stage will certainly be rewarded by the audience. Parts are available from Edition Silvertrust. There is no CD, but it was recorded on a CCV LP #1020.

Two years passed before Onslow composed his last **String Quartet, No.36 in A, Op.69** in 1845. Dedicated to Charles Leonard, another French violin virtuoso, it never gained much popularity or became part of the repertoire. For despite Kistner's (Onslow's German publisher) advertisement that players "*would easily recognize this quartet as the prescribed offspring of the capable master Onslow,"* it does not sound like his earlier quartets, especially the first movement, *Allegro non troppo presto.* To begin with, Onslow abandons his the slow and often ominous introduction and starts right in with the opening theme, split between the cello and first violin. (see above) The melodic austerity has more in common with middle or late Beethoven than Onslow: The reason for the *non troppo presto* marking becomes quite clear in the development section as all of the voices (but especially the viola and 1st violin) are presented with considerable technical challenges in the form of rapid *sciolte* passage work. By no means an easy movement to put together, it conveys a sense of searching for new directions.

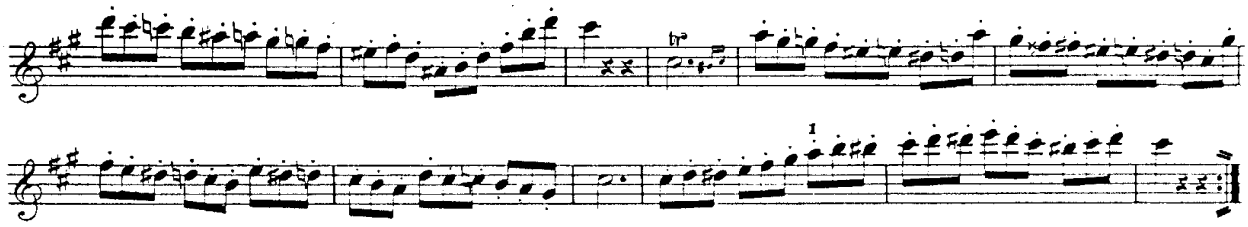


Almost certainly, Onslow must have examined the Middle and Late quartets of Beethoven. (unknown and unplayed in France at that time) This can clearly be heard in the opening bars of the *Adagio molto expressivo.* (below) Whereas in the first movement, the second theme could be characterized as "Onslow-like," here the entire movement shows the composer breaking away from the pathos and drama of the opera or the lovely lied toward something tonally thinner. Perhaps it is a kind of mid-19th Century music of the spheres. This is not the type of music where one goes away singing the melodies but there is a sense of universality to it. As in the first movement, the viola is given a very prominent role in presenting the thematic material.





In the last two movements, we do clearly hear the Onslow who had written the preceding two quartets. A *Menuetto, Moderato e molto grazioso* features a lovely, somewhat old-fashioned theme, first presented by the cello. The violin and then the viola take it up in turns. The second theme is closely related to the first rhythmically. As in Quartet No.34, the trio, rather than being slower or more gentle, is faster and provides more excitement than the minuet itself. (see example at top of next page)



The finale, *Presto agitato*, is the most typical of the four movements. It is very exciting with each of the voices being given plenty to do. The first theme, in a minor, sets the mood. After a sudden fermata, a martial second theme is stated. A marvelous bridge passage leads to the third theme and with the viola leading the way, the coda rushes to another thrilling conclusion. This is a fine quartet. The fact that Onslow seems, at least in the first 2 movements, to be striking out in new directions must have affected its popularity and is certainly a reason why this should not be among the first quartets to be revived in the concert hall.

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Although the purpose of this work has been to familiarize the reader with George Onslow's string quartets, I felt it was necessary to do this against the backdrop of his life. So although this effort is not meant to be a exhaustive biography, I feel it incumbent to remark briefly upon his final years simply for the sake of completeness before dealing with the final question of how it was that his string quartets (and other chamber works) disappeared.

During the mid 1830's, George and his brothers had quarreled over the terms of their father's will and the inheritance of various properties primarily located in England. A lawsuit brought by George was successfully resolved in his favor, but in 1837, a further lawsuit led to his losing possession of his father's chateau, Chalendras. This forced him buy land and build a new home. Having grown up in the Auvergne, he found land nearby and built a new chateau which he called Bellerive. For first half of the 1840's, he was busily occupied with this project.

With the publication of his 36th string quartet, Op.69, Onslow seemed to be heading off in new directions. But, although he lived for 8 more years, he never returned to the genre again. He did however write another 15 chamber works, 14 of which are for ensembles larger than a quartet. (I shall mention them in passing but unfortunately any detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this work.) Onslow's preoccupation with such compositions can be explained by the growing popularity around the mid 19th Century in France for larger ensembles such as quintets and sextets, especially those which combined piano with strings or strings and winds or all three. In Paris, these works were are all the rage and several then well-known composers, such as Bertini and Louise Farrenc, were also writing for these combinations.

In the autumn of 1845, immediately following his last string quartet, Onslow composed his First Quintet for Piano and Strings, Op.70. It was dedicated to Sigmund Thalberg, an Austrian pianist then regarded as Liszt's only rival. Later in 1846, Onslow made his first visit to German soil since the French Revolution. He had been invited to the annual Rhineland Music Festival

sponsored by the Gesellschaft des Musikfests den Nieder Rhine which that year was being held in Aachen (Aix-la Chapelle) The Gesellschaft, formed in the year of Beethoven's death, had held a festival each year inviting distinguished performers and composers from all over Europe to participate. While at the festival, Onslow got to hear Jenny Lind sing and Mendelssohn, the festival's director, conduct. He was impressed by both. And Mendelssohn demonstrated his high esteem for Onslow by publicly honoring him. After conducting the latter's overture to *Le Colporteur* and his Fourth Symphony, which closed the festival, Mendelssohn called Onslow onto the stage and in an emotional gesture gave him the baton with which he had conducted.

After the festival, Onslow journeyed to his estate and did not return to Paris with compositions in hand until the spring of 1848. He brought with him four string quintets (Nos.28-31) and his Second Piano Quintet, which was for the *Trout* grouping (i.e. piano, string trio and bass). The string quintets were all published with a second cello or alternative bass part. The 30th quintet achieved some popularity and was championed by Henri Vieuxtemps.

1848, of course, was a seminal year in both French and European history. In France, it marked the beginning of the end of the old aristocratic system and the gradual erosion of the class structure. Although most of these changes little affected Onslow's life as they happened slowly and over the course several decades, one change was more rapid—that of fashion in the arts and music. The rise of Louis Napoleon and the middle classes created rapid changes in Parisian musical taste. During the first half of the 19th Century, music in general, and chamber music in particular, had been the special preserve of the aristocracy. With the political and cultural ascendancy of the middle classes, the popularity of chamber music declined quickly. Compared to the years immediately preceding Louis Napoleon's election, the number of chamber music performances decreased suddenly. Onslow's music did not escape this trend and as the bulk of his music was chamber music, there was a measurable decrease in the amount his music being performed in front of the Parisian public. 1848 was also the year Onslow composed his Nonet for strings and winds, Op.77. It was dedicated to Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, whom Onslow knew personally. Albert was not only a fine musician in his own right but also an promoter and sponsor of musical concerts in England and Germany. Subsequently, Onslow arranged the Nonet as a sextet for piano and winds, Op.77b. The Nonet originally enjoyed some popularity but soon disappeared although the work remained popular as a *Grand Sextet.*

1849 was a fruitful year for Onslow. He composed five fine works. The first was String Quintet No.32, Op.78 (2 violas), the second a Sextet for Piano, winds and bass, Op.79. He also arranged this work for piano and strings (*Trout instrumentation)* as Op.79b. Next, he finished his 34th String Quintet (also 2 violas), Op.80, then a Wind Quintet (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon & Horn) Op.81, and finally, his last string quintet No.34, Op.82 (again for 2 violas). A year later (1850) and deeply depressed, Onslow, writing to a friend about these works, uncomfortably noted that while they were charming, they presented nothing new. Certainly they break no new ground, but it must be said that the three viola quintets (Opp.78, 80 & 82) are among his finest chamber music works. I have played them many times and can without qualification say they belong in the first rank of all viola quintets. This is an opinion that has been shared by nearly every player with whom I have played them. (No small number, certainly more than two score.) The effects of Onslow's hunting accident had left him with frequent and severe headaches which in turn led to bouts of depression.

As the years went by these increased and in 1850, he composed no chamber music. In 1851, he composed only one work, his last, Piano Trio No.10.

It is without question that the acute depression from which Onslow suffered during the last years of his life greatly affected his judgment. This depression was further exacerbated by the fact that from 1850 on, the French finally "discovered" Beethoven's Late Quartets. For decades, the French had either ignored or written-off these works as unintelligible gibberish. Then suddenly, almost overnight, these Quartets became wildly popular. Contemporary Parisian accounts at that time relate that the works of other composers, including Onslow's, which appeared on the same program as those of Beethoven's late period, generally received a rather tepid, if not cool, reception.

Also weighing on him were his duties at the Conservatoire and the Academie des Beaux Arts. He complained that engagements with fellow composers and colleagues such as Halevy, Mme Farrenc and Berlioz frequently forced him to lay everything aside. When Halevy went to conduct his opera in London, Onslow took over all of his duties at the Conservatoire, including judging student examinations. He had no time for himself, let alone time to compose. As he somewhat bitterly noted, *"I am nourished by student fugues from 9 in the morning until 6 in the evening*." As time passed, he found it increasingly difficult to remain separated from his wife Delphine who continued to live at Bellerive in the Auvergne. Yet, the more time he spent in Paris, the more he found himself importuned by a myriad of individuals seeking his support for various elections to academies, or his help with their projects and publications. His influence was such that those who obtained his support (such as the opera composer Ambroise Thomas) could be assured of success in their endeavors. Aspiring composers inundated him with their latest creations seeking his help. And to all of these demands, he gave of himself unstintingly. Nearly 70, Onslow became unable to keep up such a frenetic pace. His personality, which until then had been described as full of vigor, liveliness and zest began to change. One of his acquaintances remarked that formerly when rehearsing a work, "*his ardent encouragements to the artists electrified and enlivened them. His inspiration raised them above the earth."* It was, he noted, *"impossible to remain irresponsive in front of such a man. The coldest ice would thaw in that fire before his energy."*

But by 1851-2, this had all changed. He became more subdued. No doubt this was caused by a degeneration in his health. He complained of constant headaches and feared that he was losing his sight as well as the hearing in his one good ear. In the summer of 1853, he briefly returned to Paris for the last time, a mere shell of his former self. Halevy, who had seen him there, related that Onslow had difficulty seeing and all who came upon him felt that he *"would soon be leaving their earthly company forever."* Back in Bellerive, his health declined rapidly and in late September he contracted pneumonia. He died October 3, 1853.

At a posthumous performance of his Grand Sextet (the Nonet arranged for piano sextet) in 1855, the then prominent French critic, Auguste Blanchard wrote that Onslow was *"as great and justly celebrated as his brothers Mozart, Weber and Beethoven."* How is it then that his works completely disappeared from the repertoire and his name was rele-

gated to musical dictionaries where he was classed as a second rate composer? (albeit as one critic wrote, in the front ranks of the second raters)

Even the casual reader of this work will, no doubt, have realized that during his lifetime, George Onslow rose to the heights of fame and respect within his profession. His works were praised and he was considered a composer of the first rank by such men as Schumann, Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Chopin as well as by many others who counted. These were men who were among the most perceptive critics in Europe at the time. Yet since then, critics from the late 19th Century on have given us an historical view which holds that: 1) Onslow's music had only didactic merit; 2) Onslow developed his ideas in a scholastic, cold manner without the outbursts of genius associated with the great masters; and 3) Onslow failed to give brilliance to his instrumentation. (A good example of this type of criticism can be found in the article on Onslow in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* as well as in Cobbett's own wrong-headed, inane addenda) It seems strange that Schumann and Mendelssohn could have been so deceived by Onslow's quartets and quintets which they ranked amongst the finest of all chamber music creations while these latter day experts have been able to "see through" Onslow. How did they accomplish this? Most of these critics clearly had never played, let alone heard Onslow's music performed. Instead, they drew their "opinions" from and paraphrased what had already been written by earlier "experts". Some merely looked at the music on paper. Again, Woolett's article in the *Cyclopedia* (the longest and most detailed ever to appear in English) is an excellent example of this kind of criticism.

But the question remains, who initially murdered Onslow's reputation? It is significant that until 2003, there had never been a full-length substantive biography on Onslow in any language by a music historian which would have opened up his life and presented the knowledge which could have secured his proper place for posterity. (In 2003, Baudime Jam published his biography, *George Onslow,* Edition Melophile. It is in French and as of 2005 has not been translated.) Only short biographical sketches appeared on the composer, usually as entries in a musical dictionary. Of particular significance is the fact that virtually every biographical sketch about Onslow published since 1880 can be traced to a rather cool five column article on the composer by the famous Belgian music scholar François Joseph Fetis in his *Biographie universelle des musiciens et Bibliographie generale de la musique*. This book established Fetis' reputation and went through seven editions between the time of Onslow's death and 1877. Although Fetis was not the only one to write about Onslow, (For example: Gustav Schilling in his *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften oder Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst* penned a very flattering entry) Fetis' opinions about the man and his music were held to be the most authoritative because he had known Onslow personally. Unfortunately, Fetis was not unbiased. First of all, Fetis who was very class conscious, did not like aristocrats of any stripe. This would have affected his opinion of Onslow before they ever met. Fetis' bias can clearly be seen in his *Bibliographie* where time and again, he refers to even the best composers who were also aristocrats as "distinguished amateurs." Secondly, Dr. Franks (author of a doctoral thesis on Onslow) postulates that personal dealings between the two may have led Fetis to have harbored hard feelings toward Onslow which colored his judgment.

But perhaps the most important factor which ultimately destroyed Onslow's reputation was how freely the French had considered him Beethoven's equal. This occurred during a time when

none of the Late Quartets were known, understood or played in France. Beethoven's music first reached France between 1805-1810 and despite the efforts of Reicha, Onslow and others, it met with failure. Only during the Restoration (1815-30) did Beethoven's early music become known but it still was regarded as difficult to understand because of its sudden shifts in dynamic levels, interweaving melodic lines, dense harmonies, and unusual solos given to the lower voices——all similarities it shared with Onslow's music. As such, Onslow's reputation suffered with Beethoven in the beginning. In 1830, when Beethoven's early quartets began to be understood and appreciated, the fact that Onslow's music was similar, at least in these characteristics, did not escape the public's notice and his reputation rose as well.

To the modern ear, it is hard to understand how the French could have considered Onslow and Beethoven to have sounded similar. Only when one takes into account the Restoration French preference for Italian music and the general lack of understanding for the 'new' German writing, sometimes even from the pens of Haydn and Mozart, is it understandable how they might have made this connection. As the Beethoven 'craze' grew throughout the 1840's so did Onslow's reputation. During this time, both the French public and French music critics regarded Beethoven's Late Quartets as the product of insanity in old age. When at last, the Late Quartets suddenly came into favor during the 1850's and 1860's, it was seen that Onslow's music had never progressed past a certain point, had never approached the unknowable universality of Beethoven's Late Quartets. Never mind that the same could be said of every other composer's works, because it was only Onslow who had been regarded Beethoven's equal.

As far as the public was concerned, Onslow had stopped innovating and his music lacked innovation because it no longer offered something new to the Parisian ear. Ultimately, this wrong-headed and unfair comparison had drastic consequences for Onslow's reputation. From our vantage point, we can clearly see that Beethoven's Late Quartets were *sui generis.* He stands alone, a musical titan of the 19th Century. To have been regarded as an equal by his contemporaries placed Onslow in a very disadvantageous position wherein he was examined and criticized for something he was not nor ever intended to be. The reaction of the French musical public, never great lovers of instrumental (and especially chamber) music, was harsh. Onslow was not moved to a pedestal alongside of Schumann or Mendelssohn, but thrown away to be forgotten.

Onslow's fall to oblivion may also be explained by the fact that Onslow's 'public' music never achieved any lasting success. Whether his operas and symphonies were second rate is arguable. Certainly his symphonies, for a time, enjoyed some success in Germany under Mendelssohn and were appreciated in London. Be this as it may, what 19th Century composer was able to make a lasting name solely by writing first rate chamber music? One can argue that some of the well-known composers such as Beethoven or Mendelssohn might have, but the fact remains, it is pure conjecture. Whatever the reason(s), in the final analysis one thing is clear: Onslow's string quartets are a magnificent inheritance for which all lovers of chamber music should be grateful.

Addendum

In 2003-4, manuscripts surfaced of Onslow's Op.60, a work for string quartet based on themes from his unsuccessful opera, *The Duc d'Guise.* These have been recorded on CD by the Prima Vista Quartet on CD #

A Quick Guide to George Onslow's String Quartets

Rating Scale: 10—An unquestioned masterwork by any standard / 9—1st Class work which belongs in the repertoire / 8—Good work deserving of occasional concert hall performance / 7—A good work mostly of interest for amateurs / 6—Average but still enjoyable. Pluses (+) and Minuses (-) are used to further refine and indicate a work somewhat better or worse but not quite at the next number Unless otherwise noted all recordings are CDs (Ratings are the opinion of the author) This information was accurate as of 2004.

Number / Opus / Date	Rating	Comments	In Print	Recorded
No.1, Op.4 No.1 1807	8	Deserves performance-Equal to Haydn's Op.76-Historically important early work	Verlag Bitterhof	CPO 999 329
No.2, Op.4 No.2 1807	8-	1st violin part fairly demanding. Part writing somewhat uneven	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.3, Op.4 No.3 1807	9	Excellent early work by the Master	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.4, Op.8 No.1 1813-15	10	Perform it. Put it in the Repertoire	Merton Copying	CPO 999 793
No.5, Op.8 No.2 1813-15	6-	Dedicated to Violin virtuoso Baillot & sounds like it—Way too much 1st violin	SJ Music	No
No.6. Op.8 No.3 1813-15	9	Subtitled "Al Hispanuola" Original & clever treatment of Spanish Dance	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.7, Op.9 No.1 1815	9	Variations on God Save the King as good as those Haydn's Emperor Quartet	Edition Silvertrust	CPO 999 060
No.8, Op.9 No.2 1815	8	Tough 1st violin part in the last mov't--1st 3 movts incredibly good	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.9, Op.9 No.3 1815	8+	This is a fine work with a real powerhouse finale	Edition Silvertrust	CPO 999 060
No.10, Op.10 No.1 1816	10	Shows rhythmic influence of Beethoven Op.18 & sounds different from earlier wks	Edition Silvertrust	Koch 3-1623 CPO 999 329
No.11, Op.10 No.2 1816	7+	Still generally good work, 1st violin dominates a little	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.12, Op.10 No.3 1816	8-	Nice work, like all three of the Op.10 qts it features a Dance from the Auvergne	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.13, Op.21 No.1 1822	8-	1st mov't has concerto level difficulty 1st violin part. Terrific dramatic andante	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.14, Op.21 No.2 1822	8	Solid Work with charming melodies and good part writing	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.15, Op.21 No.3 1822	8	Catchy military maestoso 1st mov't. Effective minuet. Tough moto perpetuo finale	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.16, Op.36 No.1 1829	9	Very fine and original Andante, Haunting and propulsive scherzo	Edition Silvertrust	No
No.17, Op.36 No.2 1829	9	Set of variations on an Air Popular des Montagnes d'Auvergne	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.18, Op.36 No.3 1829	10	Each movement is better than the last. Leaves nothing to be desired	Edition Silvertrust	No
No.19, Op.46 No.1 1831	10	Incredibly powerful tragic opening, good middle movements, What a finale!!	Edition Silvertrust	ASV DCA 808
No.20, Op.46 No.2 1831	9	Effective pizzicato Andante, Drum-like finale very rousing	Verlag Bitterhof	CPO 999 793
No.21, Op.46 No.3 1831	9	Very effective opening movement rhythmically reminiscent of Dohanyi's 2nd Qt	Edition Silvertrust	CPO 999 329
No.22, Op.47 1833	10	Shows influence of Beethoven's Op.59. Has everything you could want	Edition Silvertrust	CPO 999 060
No.23, Op.48 1834	7++	Problem here: Last 2 movements are a '10' but the 1st 2 are rather ordinary	Verlag Bitterhof	Advidis Valois 4749
No.24, Op.49 1834	8+	Outer movements excellent, finale Presto 1st rate, middle movements good	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.25, Op.50 1834	8-	Concerto writing for 1st violin in 1st movement. Marvelous scherzo	No	CPO 999 793
No.26, Op.52 1835	8	Typical 1st rate Onslow-esque Minuetto. Satisfying finale	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.27, Op.53 1835	7-	1st movt very difficult ensemble-wise to put together. Scherzo a 10, Finale a 6	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.28, Op.54 1835	7	Very nice 'Prayer" Andante. Brilliant scherzo, another ordinary finale	Verlag Bitterhof	No
No.29, Op.55 1835	10	Technically difficult cello part throughout. Brilliant use of arpeggio in last movt	No	No
No.30, Op.56 1836	10	Needs pro cellist for astounding 1st movt. Finale a knockout, whole qt tour d'force	Edition Silvertrust	ASV-DCA 808
No.31, Op.62 1841	9+	Mendelssohnian scherzo. Top notch Andante cantabile and Finale Allegro vivace	No	No
No.32, Op.63 1841	9	Lovely cello solo in Adagio with dramatic storm episodes	No	No
No.33, Op.64 1841	9	Beethovenesque scherzo. Typical exciting 'La Chasse' finale	Rara Avis Sorozat	No
No.34, Op.65 1842	8	Anticipates Wolf's Italian Serenade in finale	No	No
No.35, Op.66 1843	10	Very unusual 1st movt, very brilliant scherzo with dramatic basso trio, great finale	Edition Silvertrust	LP: CCV 1020
No.36, Op.39 1845	8	He's heading in new directions. Music of the spheres Adagio Not typical but impt	No	No

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