The string quartet is preeminently the dialectical form of instrumental music, the one most naturally suited to the activity of “logical disputation” or, to take another definition of dialectic, of “inquiry into truth.” The closely related characters of his four instruments, moreover, while in combination they cover an ample compass of pitch, do not lend themselves to indulgence in purely coloristic effects. All this made the quartet an apt medium for Beethoven, that supreme long-term planner and follower-through of highly organized musical argument. It was natural for him to explore it in all three of his main creative periods, and to use it as the vehicle for his last and greatest revelations. The six quartets of Opus 18 explore the implications of the sonata principle, diversifying its operation by annexing new tonal areas and incorporating much complex, even ostentatious, contrapuntal work.

String Sextet in B-flat Major, Op. 18
Johannes Brahms
Born: May 7, 1833
Died: April 3, 1897
Composed: 1860
Last PCMS performance: Johannes Quartet, Jan 2017
Duration: 35 minutes

In a letter to the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim, Robert Schumann praised a young Brahms and predicted his enormous success. Based on what little Schumann had heard of Brahms’ music, this came as quite the shock. While it was gratifying, the glowing predictions of greatness laid a heavy burden of responsibility on Brahms’ shoulders. It was a burden he never ceased to be aware of, and it led a naturally diffident young man into perhaps excessive extremes of self-criticism. Nothing, then, could have been more natural than his reluctance to tackle the media Beethoven had made particularly his own. The string sextet, on the other hand, was a genre the earlier master had never tried, and well suited to appeal to Brahms’ rich harmonic style. There are a number of obvious Beethoven references in this sextet, among them the tranquillo passage in the first movement that echoes Beethoven’s Septet, and the four-note figure in the trio of the third movement that is identical with the phrase used in the same way at the same juncture in the Fifth Symphony.