



NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Visionary

String Quartet in B flat major Op. 130

- I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro
- II. Presto
- III. Andante con moto, ma non troppo
- IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai
- V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo - attacca
- VI. Finale. Allegro

Opus 130 was the last of three quartets (Opp 127, 132 and 130) that Beethoven undertook to write for Prince Galitzin (1794 - 1866). The Russian was a fervent admirer of Beethoven's music and approached him in November 1822 to write "one, two or three quartets for which labour I will be glad to pay you whatever you think proper... I will accept the dedication with gratitude". Beethoven accepted the commission, noting that "since I see that you are cultivating the violoncello, I will take care to give you satisfaction in this regard", but it was a long time before he delivered the quartets: Opus 127 in January 1825, Opus 132 in February 1826 and Opus 130 in March 1826.

With six movements of wildly varying lengths and moods, Opus 130 has something of the feeling of a classical divertimento, in which dance movements alternate with more weighty compositions. The first movement opens with a slow introduction, its hushed chromaticism a powerful contrast to the brisk polyphony of running semiquavers and pointedly rhythmic quavers of the first theme. The recurrence of these slow passages gives the movement a feeling of spaciousness, as does the gracefully arching second theme. The violin and cello converse over murmuring cadences before the first theme reappears uninterrupted and leads straight into the second theme and a tidy coda.

The energetic Presto is in a neat ternary (A-B-A) form with an eccentric bridge passage containing breathless embellishments in the violin. The Andante is delightfully playful, with a two-bar introduction marked 'poco scherzoso'. The first theme is just seven bars long, with a dark viola solo later taken up by the violin over a pompous staccato bass, ending with a precise cadence. The longer and less formal second theme's pervasive rhythmic figure consists of a dotted quaver followed by two demisemiquavers. The final coda consists of a most un-classical collection of fragments.

The Alla danza tedesca (German dance) is charming, graceful and utterly conventional. However, it is skilfully contrived, with the dance rhythm, including the characteristic cross-rhythms, conveyed without any of the more hackneyed waltz figures. The Cavatina takes its name from the operatic stage, suggesting that Beethoven saw this deeply felt movement as having an especially vocal quality. The movement closes with an air of indescribable peace. Beethoven composed the finale in September 1826 as a substitute for the *Große Fuge*. Matter-of-fact themes are accompanied for the most part by a lively hopping figure. A long passage of indefatigable semiquaver counterpoint which leads into a formidable series of octaves followed by the recapitulation and a surprisingly elaborate coda.

Große Fuge (Great Fugue) in B flat major Op. 133

Overtura – Allegro – Fuga – Meno mosso e moderato – Allegro molto e con brio – Meno mosso e moderato – Allegro molto e con brio – Allegro

A century after it was written, Igor Stravinsky called the *Große Fuge* "this absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever." However, at its premiere in 1826, the original finale

of the String Quartet Opus 130 was greeted with universal disbelief. A Leipzig reviewer summed up the reaction, noting that the *Große Fuge* was "incomprehensible".

The publisher Mathias Artaria was skeptical of Opus 130's commercial viability and asked Karl Holz, who had played second violin in Schuppanzigh's quartet at the premiere, to approach Beethoven about composing a substitute finale. Holz convinced Beethoven to write a new ending by suggesting that the Fugue was such an original work that it merited separate publication. Artaria agreed to pay a supplementary honorarium for the new movement.

The Overtura has the players grappling with passages of extreme technical difficulty in the double fugue. One subject consists of angular intervals, the other a dotted rhythmic figure, spiced with triplet countersubjects. The unrelenting *fortissimo* dynamic creates a mood of barely controlled aggression. The *Meno mosso* is blissfully spacious and serene. Rather than precise fugal entries, it is freely polyphonic, with relaxed dialogue between the instruments. The *Allegro molto* is a scherzo style using trills as a vehicle for frequent and remote modulations. The *Meno mosso* and *Allegro molto* themes reappear briefly. The final *Allegro* makes a bold statement of both fugal subjects, bringing this mammoth composition to a deft and graceful conclusion.

String Quartet in C sharp minor Op. 131

- I. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto espressivo - attacca:
- II. Allegro molto vivace - attacca:
- III. Allegro molto - attacca:
- IV. Andante, ma non troppo e molto cantabile - Andante moderato e lusinghiero - Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice - Allegretto
- V. Presto - Molto poco adagio - attacca:
- VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante - attacca:
- VII. Allegro

Illness interrupted the composition of Opus 131 between December 1825 and June 1826, but it was after completing the quartet that Beethoven faced one a great crisis: his 19-year-old nephew Karl, his legal ward since 1816, shot himself on 6 August 1826. He survived, but in an interview with the Viennese police magistrate claimed that it was his uncle's obsessive love that had driven him to suicide, saying "I grew worse because my uncle wanted me to be better." After Karl's convalescence, Beethoven's friend Stephan von Breuning arranged for him to join the regiment of one Baron von Stutterheim in 1827. Out of gratitude and relief, Beethoven dedicated the C-sharp minor quartet to von Stutterheim - who, as far as is known, never attended a concert in his life.

The first movement of Opus 131 is in a fugal style, an elaborate *ricercare*, or contrapuntal instrumental creation. The *Adagio ma non troppo* is spacious and meditative, with a simple theme that divides neatly in two. A freely contrapuntal section develops the two halves of the theme: the first with *stretto* (overlapping entries), and the second with sequences. The second movement's theme has a cheerful, naïve quality, and is first heard against a drone accompaniment. The coda includes dramatic unison passages. The following *Allegro moderato* – just eleven bars long – is styled as an operatic *recitativo accompagnato* (accompanied declamation). The *Andante ma non troppo* takes the form of a theme and six variations plus a coda. The variations range from restless and darkly coloured, to startlingly simple and austere, to a graceful dance.

The *Presto* is a good-natured scherzo, darting through a simple theme, with a relaxed trio section. The movement ends with a striking coda that includes atmospheric use of *sul ponticello* (bowing close to the bridge, creating a whispering effect) and *pizzicato* (plucking). The *Adagio* compresses the deep emotion and heartfelt lyricism of Beethoven's greatest slow movements into barely two minutes. An aggressively rhythmic theme contrasts with a tender and lyrical theme. This rhythmic first subject that reaches a magnificent climax during the coda, combined with a simple countermelody that rings out like a peal of bells.