



NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Illuminator

String Quartet in D major, Op. 18, No. 3

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Allegro
- IV. Presto

The set of six Opus 18 quartets were published in June and October 1801. Beethoven dedicated the set to Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz (1772-1816), one of his greatest patrons and an enthusiastic violinist. From the mid-1790s, Lobkowitz employed a private orchestra at his Viennese palace, and several of Beethoven's symphonies received experimental airings there before their public premieres. In 1796 the Prince engaged a string quartet to give weekly concerts. In addition to Op. 18, Beethoven dedicated the Triple Concerto, Symphonies Nos. 3, 4, and 6, String Quartet Op. 74 ('Harp') and the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* to Prince Lobkowitz.

The third work of the Op. 3 quartets, composed in 1798-9, was the first to be completed to Beethoven's satisfaction. The opening Allegro is a model of simplicity, weaving together two contrasting themes: the first an artfully decorated violin melody at first accompanied by sustained harmonies and then expanded by all four players; the second a jaunty figure based on thirds. The longest of the four movements, the Andante con moto, is an understated rondo which spins out a sequential melody with great subtlety, gradually unravelling independent voices from an initially homophonic structure.

The Allegro which follows is a classic Beethoven scherzo with two clearly defined sections. The Trio moves to the minor, with a four-note cello ostinato derived from a 17th-century dance, the chaconne. The Quartet ends with an agile Presto in simplified sonata form, the development section based around fragments of the original theme. A few bars with a *smorzando* (fading away) effect lead directly into a lively recapitulation and a graceful ending.

String Quartet in F major, Op. 18, No. 1

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato
- III. Scherzo. Allegro molto
- IV. Allegro

In 1798 a young Latvian theologian and violinist named Karl Amenda arrived in Vienna and found employment as reading tutor to Princess Karoline Lobkowitz. Amenda and Beethoven became inseparable, only parting when Amenda returned to Latvia in the autumn of 1799 to become a pastor. As a reminder of their friendship, Beethoven gave his friend a newly copied score of the String Quartet Opus 18 No 1, with a warm dedication inscribed on the first violin part.

Prior to Amenda's departure, Beethoven played him the second movement of this quartet and asked him what image it evoked. "It pictured for me the parting of two lovers." said Amenda. "Good!" said Beethoven, "I thought of the scene in the burial vault in *Romeo and Juliet*."

The opening Allegro con brio is founded upon a sprightly rhythmic motif which dominates the entire movement. This brief turning figure is used in myriad ways: as a melody, as a rhythmic accompaniment, and for polyphonic passages. While the movement has an extended harmonic range and travels a considerable distance from its tonic key, the concise nature of the theme gives it focus and unity.

After a hushed and atmospheric opening, with a soulful violin melody over sustained, almost organ-like sonorities in the lower voices, the Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato develops into a fragmented series of moods - passion, joy, fear, despair - mingling with the original theme to create a dramatic musical dialogue strongly evocative of the last moments of Shakespeare's play. "Affettuoso" ("affectionately") was often used in early 18th century music and 'appassionato' ("passionately") became popular during the 19th century, but neither was common when Beethoven produced this deeply felt slow movement. To write a slow movement in a minor key within a major quartet was also unusual for the period, as was Beethoven's slow 9/8 tempo.

The following Scherzo is brief and brittle with cadences delayed almost to the point of absurdity and a rollicking Trio. The concluding Allegro incorporates contrasting themes into a broadly conceived rondo. The way that all four voices dart through lively figurations give the music an engagingly breathless quality.

String Quartet in F major Op. 59, No. 1 'Rasumovsky'

- I. Allegro
- II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
- III. Adagio molto e mesto – attacca
- IV. Thème russe. Allegro

Beethoven dedicated Opus 59, No. 1 to Count Andreas Kirillovich Rasumovsky (1752-1836), the Russian ambassador to Vienna and the brother-in-law of Prince Lichnowsky, the dedicatee of Beethoven's Opus 1. An art collector and music lover, Count Rasumovsky supported a permanent string quartet from 1808 to 1816, founded to perform the three quartets which he commissioned from Beethoven in late 1805. Described as an "enemy of the Revolution but good friend of the fair sex", Rasumovsky was one of Beethoven's most significant patrons and in addition to the Op. 59 Quartets was the joint dedicatee (with Lobkowitz) of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies.

As the opening phrase of the first movement soars into being it is clear that the Rasumovsky Quartets were conceived in a sound world light-years away from Op. 18. This is quartet writing on an unprecedented scale, both in the length and construction of the movements (all four movements of Op. 59 No 1 are in full sonata form), and in the symphonic spaciousness of Beethoven's vision.

The Allegro is typical of Beethoven's increasingly mature style, coupling rhythmic drive with a slow rate of harmonic change. Rather than the short, incisive figures of earlier works, the melodies are flowing and continuous, yet are easily divisible into smaller motifs. The cantabile opening is ideally suited to adventurous adaptations in the development section, and in a departure from classical sonata form the exposition is not repeated. After a recapitulation which arrives without any of the standard harmonic preparation, the climax of the whole movement occurs in the coda, as the first theme rings out over rich harmonies.

The mainstay of the Allegretto is the rhythmic figure which forms the first subject. However, it is the more lyrical second subject which begins the recapitulation before this highly individual scherzo ends with one of Beethoven's favourite juxtapositions of *pianissimo* and *fortissimo*.

The Adagio molto e mesto ('mournful') provides a stark contrast to the high-spirited ending of the Allegretto. Remarkable for its highly effective use of *pizzicato* (plucking), and redolent with deeply felt emotion, the early sketches bear the inscription "A weeping willow or acacia over my brother's grave" The tragic mood is gradually dispelled as a florid violin passage over a sustained dominant seventh leads directly into the finale.

The Allegro is all brilliance and energy, featuring a Russian folk song in which a soldier laments the hardships of military life: Beethoven sped it up considerably. By an unusual use of extended trills at the end of the exposition and during the development, Beethoven links the finale to the violin transition from the third movement. The coda contains some lively fugal writing before the folk song returns at a more mournful tempo, only to be swept aside by a galloping conclusion.