



NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Immortal

String Quartet in C minor Op. 18, No. 4

- I. Allegro ma non tanto
- II. Scherzo. Andante scherzoso quasi Allegretto
- III. Menuetto. Allegretto
- IV. Allegro - Prestissimo

C minor was Beethoven's most dramatic key, used for some of his grandest works including the Piano Trio Opus 1 No. 3, *Sonate Pathétique* and the Fifth Symphony. Opus 18 No. 4 is Beethoven's only C minor string quartet and is undeniably richer and more massive in texture than the other five Opus 18 quartets. Perhaps not as stormy as some of his other C minor works, however.

The Allegro ma non tanto is in sonata form with classically defined themes: the first lyrical and determinedly in minor key, the second loosely derived from the first. The themes are treated resourcefully, particularly in Beethoven's choice of fresh harmonies and countermelodies in the development and coda sections, but occasionally the writing lies uneasily, with the dramatic accents that Beethoven loved in C minor.

Opus 18 No. 4 is the first of several works by Beethoven with a scherzo and a minuet but no slow movement. Like the second movement of the First Symphony the Scherzo combines sonata (A-B-A) form with fugal writing. The phrases are quirkily asymmetrical with accents on odd beats. Beethoven swaps fluidly between contrapuntal and harmonic textures, especially in the development, which begins fugally but later moves seamlessly through a long, purely harmonic section.

The Menuetto is sombre and passionate, clad in chromatic harmonies that obscure its true tonality, and with restless, sudden accents (*sforzandi*) on the third beat of every bar. The Trio in A flat provides a peaceful interlude, with a gentle conversation between second violin and viola over a rocking triplet accompaniment. Unusually, Beethoven directs that the repeat of the Menuetto should be played faster than the first time.

The Allegro is a clear-cut rondo. The agitated theme, dominated by furious violin figuration, alternates with two episodes: a lyrical second violin melody and a brief, blustering passage derived from the main theme. The long coda seems destined for an understated ending in C major, but rallies at the last moment.

String Quartet in A major Op. 18, No. 5

- I. Allegro
- II. Menuetto
- III. Andante cantabile. Thema - Variationen I - V - Coda. Poco Adagio
- IV. Allegro

Opus 18 No. 5, the most retiring of the Opus 18 quartets, has strong affinities with Mozart's quartet in A major, K464. Beethoven is known to have made a copy of the last two movements and Carl Czerny recalled that: "Beethoven once saw at my house the score of six quartets by Mozart dedicated to Haydn. He opened the fifth in A and said: 'That's what I call a work! In it, Mozart was telling the world: Look what I could create if the time were right!'"

The Allegro is cheerfully energetic. Beethoven moves lightly from idea to idea via orthodox harmonic transitions, and the counterpoint is lively, if not erudite. The development, constructed out of transition figures from the exposition, has a natural vivacious flow and leads economically into a

recapitulation which is an almost exact copy of the exposition. The Menuetto has a naïve quality, but beneath its easy tunefulness is tautly constructed. The theme is in two halves, one scored for two voices, the other in four, and gives way to a central section in the minor. The Trio uses Beethoven's favourite device of accents on the third beat of the bar, giving a syncopated quality.

The Andante cantabile is a set of five variations on a simple, folk-like theme: lyrical, warm, yet restrained. The first is lightheartedly fugal, the second a dance for the first violin. All five variations are in the same key, but the third and fourth introduce new textures and harmonies, with the fourth making beautiful use of dominant seventh chords. The final variation is boisterously merry, with an exaggerated use of trills.

Like the Scherzo of Op 18 No. 4 and the finale of Mozart's K464, the Allegro combines fugal writing with sonata form. In a display of pure quartet writing, all four parts are equally important in the polyphonic passages, which are energetic rather than strict counterpoint. A massive ending would be out of place in this joyful Allegro, and the movement ends with a judiciously understated coda.

String Quartet in C major Op. 59, No. 3 'Rasumovsky'

- I. Introduzione. Andante con moto - Allegro vivace
- II. Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
- III. Menuetto. Grazioso - attacca:
- IV. Allegro Molto

In the summer of 1806, Beethoven threw himself into composing a series of great instrumental works, including the Fourth Symphony, the Appassionata Sonata and the Rasumovsky Quartets. After a long struggle with his opera *Leonore* he was in an optimistic mood and ready for fresh challenges. Above his sketches for Opus 59 No. 3 is written: "Just as you plunge yourself here into the whirlpool of society, so despite all social obstacles it is possible for you to write opera. Your deafness shall be a secret no more, even where Art is involved!"

After an atmospheric introduction of slowly shifting chromatic harmonies, the lively Allegro vivace has the impact of a fresh gust of wind, blowing away early morning clouds. Full of vigorous passage work, fugato entries, and extended trills, the lengthy exposition leads to a short but eventful development. After an unobtrusive transition to the recapitulation, the movement ends with an effective coda.

The gently elegiac Andante con moto in A minor is one of Beethoven's most haunting slow movements. While the theme is original, the violin harmonies coupled with the *pizzicato* (plucked) pedal points create a Slavonic mood. It was in the slow movements of Opus 59 Nos 1 and 3 that Beethoven first realised the emotional possibilities of *pizzicato* and the carefully shaded cello line has a moody, hypnotic effect which remains one of the movement's most memorable features.

The opening of the Menuetto harks back to the 18th century in its graceful symmetry, but the rapid figuration and carefree passing of the melody from voice to voice makes it clear that this is not a run-of-the-mill dance movement. Also, unlike the classical minuet is the way in which cadences frequently fall on the third beat of the bar, giving a charmingly breathless quality. An unexpected coda in a minor key adds a note of mystery, before plunging headlong into the finale.

The fugato Allegro molto is one of Beethoven's most irresistible finales. Written in the *moto perpetuo* style, the motion is not just perpetual, but at times precipitous. Using a typical combination of rapid rhythm and slow harmony, the theme is so long that it only allows for two complete sets of entries: one at the beginning and one at the start of the recapitulation, which is further enlivened by a *marcato* (accented) countersubject. A dramatic pause leads to a teasingly extended coda, before rushing to its inevitable conclusion.