



NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Maestro

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

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

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 tonal shifts. 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.