



NEW ZEALAND
STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020
Beethoven: Innovator

String Quartet in G major Op. 18, No. 2

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio cantabile - Allegro - Tempo I
- III. Scherzo. Allegro
- IV. Allegro molto quasi Presto

1801 saw the publication of some of the finest works of Beethoven's early period, including Opus 18, the First Symphony, and the First and Second Piano Concertos. A letter to Franz Wegeler shortly after Opus 18 Nos 1-3 were published gives a positive impression of Beethoven's life in Vienna:

"On the whole it is not at all bad... my compositions bring me in a good deal; and I may say that I am offered more commissions than it is possible for me to carry out. Moreover, for every composition I can count on six or seven publishers, and even more, if I want them; people no longer come to an arrangement with me, I state my price and they pay."

But in the same letter Beethoven also told Wegeler of his secret anguish - he was losing his hearing:

"For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf. If I had any other profession, I might be able to cope with my infirmity, but in my profession, it is a terrible handicap... If it is at all possible, I will bid defiance to my fate, though I feel that as long as I live, I shall be God's most unhappy creature... *Resignation*, what a wretched resource!"

The Quartet in G major Opus 18 No 3 is one of Beethoven's most convivial, revealing little of his inner turmoil. Glancing back towards Haydn and Mozart, the first movement is breezily uncomplicated, the only note of mystery provided by a pianissimo fugal passage in the development section. The Adagio cantabile is gracious and contemplative, with a superlatively poised violin solo over a subdued accompaniment. Breaking with tradition, Beethoven interrupts the slow movement with an Allegro, which, though faster, retains the Adagio's graceful quality. After an eloquent cello solo, all four instruments present the original theme in rich polyphony.

The high-spirited Scherzo has a cut-glass clarity reminiscent of Beethoven's early piano sonatas. Hinting that this is a work looking forward to the 19th century, the second half of the Trio features surprisingly complex textures, before returning to the straightforward Scherzo. The vivacious Allegro molto is all classical urbanity, written in sonata form with clearly defined themes, vigorously developed with lively and idiomatic string writing.

String Quartet in E flat major Op. 74 'Harp'

- I. Poco Adagio - Allegro
- II. Adagio ma non troppo
- III. Presto - attacca:
- IV. Allegretto con Variazioni

May 1809 saw the French bombardment and occupation of Vienna. Unlike his aristocratic friends, Beethoven could not leave the city, communication was well-nigh impossible, and he was unable to take the country walks that inspired him. A letter to his publishers on 26 July summed up his mood:

"Let me tell you that since May 4th I have produced very little coherent work, at most a fragment here and there. The whole course of events has in my case affected both body and soul... What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me: nothing but drums, cannons, and human misery in every form."

Unsurprisingly, the 'Harp' Quartet Op. 74 was one of only a few large-scale works completed in 1809, along with the 'Emperor' Concerto. Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz, it was published in 1810.

The Adagio begins mysteriously, commencing a highly-organised tonal plan for the whole quartet. (E-flat, A-flat, C minor, and C major). The ensuing Allegro is bluntly cheerful, with a simple theme enlivened by a viola countermelody and the *pizzicati* (string plucking) which give rise to the work's nickname. The coda contains a stunningly beautiful passage as the second violin and viola herald the climactic return of the main theme in canon before a light, yet emphatic, ending.

The Adagio ma non troppo is a spacious rondo. The lyrical theme appears three times: floating serenely above sostenuto chords; lower and lavishly ornamented over accompanying triplets; and woven through a hazy accompaniment. The first episode is long and eventful, moving seamlessly through a wide range of keys, while the second introduces a new violin melody, intertwined with solo cello.

The persistent rhythms of the scherzo-presto recall Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but after a vehemently loud opening the mood is subdued. The C major Trio which follows has no such reservations, consisting of an aggressively intricate fugue. The final repeat of the Presto is heard 'Più presto quasi prestissimo', and after a skilful transition passage moves straight into the finale.

The six variations on an uncomplicated theme are vastly different while maintaining the theme's tonal structure. The first, third and fifth are lively but not particularly deep-thinking, however, the second and fourth allow the viola and violin a chance to shine. The sixth makes use of a shifting pedal tone in the cello before a coda featuring short variations on a truncated version of the theme.

String Quartet in E minor Op. 59, No. 2 'Rasumovsky'

- I. Allegro
- II. Molto Adagio. Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento
- III. Allegretto
- IV. Finale. Presto

The second of the Opus 59 Quartets was composed over an intensive period, probably between April and November 1806. As is often the case with Beethoven, it could not be more different than the work preceding it, Opus 59 No 1. Apart from the extraordinary slow movement, it is terser, darker, and more highly strung than the first 'Rasumovsky' quartet, full of a restless searching energy.

The emphatic opening chords coupled with Beethoven's highly effective pauses creates an atmosphere of mystery and suspense that persists throughout. The Allegro's main theme is triadic, brief and to the point. In the first section it is the silences, rather than the notes, that give the music its strength. Unlike the continuous flowing melodies of Opus 59 No 1, the Allegro is mercurial in its moods, with labyrinthine figuration and dramatic syncopations. Like the Fifth Symphony, the recapitulation is in the major, leaving the coda to re-establish the original tonality.

The E major Molto Adagio is one of Beethoven's most remarkable slow movements. His pupil Carl Czerny claimed that he had been inspired by "the starry sky and the movement of the spheres". While Beethoven typically shunned extramusical stimuli, the profound serenity of the Molto Adagio does not make this allusion seem far-fetched. A chorale-like melody opens the movement, with staggered entries giving an ethereal quality. Throughout, the melodies are almost continuously accompanied by persistent rhythmic figures, like hushed heartbeats, so, when at the climax of the movement the main theme sings out accompanied only by striking new harmonies, the effect is fresh and startling.

The Allegretto is an unsteady and somewhat ponderous dance, with an unsettling transition from E minor to D major at the end of the first section. In the Trio Beethoven introduces a solemn Russian hymn, treated somewhat irreverently as a brisk fugue. The Finale is a vigorous tussle between conflicting keys. It is given direction by a neatly pointed quaver/crotchet rhythm, ever-present in the accompaniment and rarely swamped by passages of strenuous counterpoint. It gives the Finale a smart, almost military flavour, although the ending is restless and indecisive until the main theme finally appears in the tonic.