



## NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

### National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Universal

#### String Quartet in B flat major Op. 18, No. 6

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio ma non troppo
- III. Scherzo. Allegro
- IV. La Malinconia. Adagio. - Allegretto quasi Allegro

Written on the threshold of a new century, the last quartet of Opus 18 is larger and more ambitious than its predecessors, as if Beethoven were trying to distance himself from the classical world by experimenting with new sounds and ideas. Nevertheless, the opening Allegro con brio recalls Haydn in its pleasantly energetic style, diatonic harmonies, and simple melodies. Except for the scale passages that join the first and second subjects, much of the themes' potential remains unexplored during the short development and straightforward recapitulation.

The decorous Adagio is spiritually close to Mozart in its relaxed elegance. Notable for its idiomatic writing rather than its memorable themes, it is in an exquisitely balanced ternary form. The sparsely scored central section provides an impressive contrast to the outer sections and looks forward to the somber textures of the Late Quartets before a brief violin cadenza leads into the repeated first section. The central episode is recalled in the coda before a low-key pizzicato ending.

The Scherzo is humorously aggressive, with persistently eccentric cross-rhythms and syncopations that shift the pulse. The Trio is more conventional, with a difficult, though not flashy first violin part. Four bars in B flat minor indignantly recall the scherzo before the da capo.

The direction 'colla più gran delicatezza' ('with the utmost delicacy') written above the opening of La Malinconia ('Melancholy') shows that Beethoven was conscious of writing in a particularly emotional style. Planned well before the main finale, the opening phrase could have grown into a fully-fledged slow movement, however, the opening is developed harmonically rather than melodically, in a way which prefigures the Late Quartets. The Allegretto which follows is a facile reaction to the intensity of the introduction with a bubbly sequential melody that is lively and charming, if conventional. The Malinconia theme recurs twice, briefly but dramatically, before being overtaken by the prestissimo coda.

#### String Quartet in F minor Op. 95 'Quartetto Serioso'

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Allegretto ma non troppo - attacca:
- III. Allegro assai vivace ma serioso
- IV. Larghetto espressivo - Allegretto agitato

Following the rejection of his marriage proposal by the much younger Therese Malfatti, to whom he had given the autograph score of *Für Elise*, Beethoven spent the summer of 1810 in Baden, a resort outside Vienna. While there he worked on the String Quartet and the 'Archduke' Trio, the only significant compositions begun that year. The autograph score of Opus 95 is dated October 1810, but recent studies suggest that it was revised extensively in 1814, before its first performance. It is dedicated to its copyist, Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz (1759 - 1833), a civil servant, amateur cellist and one of Beethoven's most loyal friends.

The title 'Serioso' (Beethoven's own) refers to the quartet's 'learned' style. He was curiously reticent about promoting it, and in 1816, the year of its publication, wrote to Sir George Smart in London: "NB. The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public."

The first movement's brief first theme introduces a distinctive semiquaver figure; the second theme is lyrical and flowing, underpinned by very simple harmonies. Gruff scales in remote keys are used as bridge passages throughout. When the first theme returns it is cut short and focuses on the lyrical second subject, ending with a dramatic interrupted cadence and a vigorous coda. The Allegretto continues the subdued mood with a restrained cello solo, leading to a beautifully sensitive theme. Expansive after the terse Allegro, the Allegretto is spaciouly constructed in a broad arch around a central fugal section which contains a restful interlude based on the opening solo.

The Allegro assai vivace is a fierce dance with two themes: a three-note figure and a scale, handled in a variety of ways. The Trio is a complete contrast with a cantabile melody accompanied by continuous quavers, moving fluidly through a series of remote keys. After both sections are repeated, the scherzo returns before an abrupt ending. After a mysterious introduction, the Allegretto is a well-organised rondo, based around a lightly scored, rhythmic theme. Not a second is wasted in its relentless motion, thwarted at the last moment by a brilliantly airy coda.

### **String Quartet in E flat major Op. 127**

- I. Maestoso - Allegro
- II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile - Andante con moto - Adagio molto espressivo
- III. Scherzando vivace - Presto
- IV. Finale

In 1821, Johann Friedrich Rochlitz, editor of *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, dismissed Beethoven as an old man with nothing more to say: "Beethoven occupies himself, as father Haydn once did, in the arranging of Scottish songs; for larger undertakings he seems to be completely written out." Beethoven's response (he referred to Rochlitz as 'Mephistopheles') was overwhelming.

Between 1821 and 1827, Beethoven completed the *Missa Solemnis* (1822), the Diabelli Variations (1823), the Ninth Symphony (1824) and the String Quartets Opp 127 - 135 (1825-6). At the time of his death he was sketching a Tenth Symphony and had plans for a Requiem and a setting of Goethe's *Faust*. Opus 127 contains many of the features which are characteristic of Beethoven's Late Quartets: a preoccupation with counterpoint, a desire to develop melodic gestures to their utmost potential, and a new approach to variations as an exercise in evolution rather than contrast.

The opening Maestoso has none of the chromatic mystery of previous introductions. The first theme of the Allegro is a whimsical idea saved from monotony by a resourceful accompaniment. The second theme is equally flowing and leads into a dramatic restatement of the Maestoso. The development section explores the first subject, including a striking tetrachord figure (derived from ground bass) in the cello part. The Adagio's theme is reminiscent of the ethereal serenity of the Benedictus from the *Missa Solemnis*, with the melody shared between the violin and the cello. The first variation maintains the theme's outline, with new rhythmic, harmonic, and contrapuntal details. The second variation, in common time, is a lightly scored dialogue for the violins, the third returns to the original mood via a beautifully simple modulation. The fourth variation, a violin-cello duet is closest in spirit to the theme, and the extended coda is harmonically daring, introducing flowing semiquavers and touches of pizzicato (plucking).

The Scherzando is persistently dotted and drily humorous. Beethoven's elaborate counterpoint and unusual harmonic scheme obscure its basically simple structure, making it appear more complex than it is. The Trio is smoother and busier than the Scherzando and reappears briefly at the end of the movement. The Finale opens with a striking octave gesture. The cheerful, rondo-like first subject is longer than the second, which is decisive and military style. A restatement of the octave phrase leads into the development section which explores both themes contrapuntally. Both themes are re-stated in full before a magical modulation into C major – achieved by raising the top note of the trill – leads into a highly original coda.