



NEW ZEALAND STRING QUARTET

National Tour 2020 Beethoven: Virtuoso

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 skillful 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 C sharp minor Op. 131

- I. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto espressivo - attacca:
- II. Allegro molto vivace - attacca:
- III. Allegro molto - attacca:
- IV. Andante, ma non troppo e molto cantabile - Andante moderato e lusinghiero - Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice - Allegretto
- V. Presto - Molto poco adagio - attacca:
- VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante - attacca:
- VII. Allegro

Illness interrupted the composition of Opus 131 between December 1825 and June 1826, but it was after completing the quartet that Beethoven faced one a great crisis: his 19-year-old nephew Karl, his legal ward since 1816, shot himself on 6 August 1826. He survived, but in an interview with the Viennese police magistrate claimed that it was his uncle's obsessive love that had driven him to suicide, saying "I grew worse because my uncle wanted me to be better." After Karl's convalescence, Beethoven's friend Stephan von Breuning arranged for him to join the regiment of one Baron von Stutterheim in 1827. Out of gratitude and relief, Beethoven dedicated the C-sharp minor quartet to von Stutterheim - who, as far as is known, never attended a concert in his life.

The first movement of Opus 131 is in a fugal style, an elaborate *ricercare*, or contrapuntal instrumental creation. The Adagio ma non troppo is spacious and meditative, with a simple theme that divides neatly in two. A freely contrapuntal section develops the two halves of the theme: the first with *stretto* (overlapping entries), and the second with sequences. The second movement's theme has a cheerful, naïve quality, and is first heard against a drone accompaniment. The coda includes dramatic unison passages. The following Allegro moderato – just eleven bars long – is styled as an operatic *recitativo accompagnato*. The Andante ma non troppo takes the form of a theme and six variations plus a coda. The variations range from restless and darkly coloured, to startlingly simple and austere, to a graceful dance.

The Presto is a good-natured scherzo, darting through a simple theme, with a relaxed trio section. The movement ends with a striking coda that includes atmospheric use of *sul ponticello* (bowing close to the bridge, creating a whispering effect) and *pizzicato*. The Adagio compresses the deep emotion and heartfelt lyricism of Beethoven's greatest slow movements into barely two minutes. An aggressively rhythmic theme contrasts with a tender and lyrical theme. This rhythmic first subject that reaches a magnificent climax during the coda, combined with a simple semibreve countermelody that rings out like a peal of bells.