

BEETHOVEN

The Complete Quartets



THE ORFORD STRING QUARTET

Volume VII

Opus 18, No. 4 / Opus 132

DE 3037



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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
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String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 18 No. 4 [24:33]

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- 2 Scherzo: Andante scherzoso quasi Allegretto (6:43)
- 3 Menuetto: Allegretto (4:22)
- 4 Allegro (4:23)

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132 [43:38]

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- 7 Molto adagio (16:13)
- 8 Alla Marcia, assai vivace (2:17)
- 9 Allegro appassionato (6:48)

ORFORD STRING QUARTET

Andrew Dawes, violin
Kenneth Perkins, violin
Terence Helmer, viola
Denis Brott, cello

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 68:21

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Beethoven took the challenge of the String Quartet with utmost seriousness. He spent over two years composing the six Quartets, opus 18, and preceded this labor with a lengthy “apprenticeship” in the form of his string trios, op. 3, 8 and 9, and the elegant arrangement for string quartet of his piano sonata, op. 14 no. 1. In 1799 he dedicated an early draft of the op. 18 no. 1 to his friend, the violinist Karl Amenda. Even in its unperfected version, the quartet was already a masterpiece, and, as Beethoven’s sketch books show, one which had undergone painstaking revision and self-criticism. But a year later, with the publication of the first three of the op. 18 works, Beethoven wrote to Amenda, urging him “Do not lend your quartet to anybody because I have greatly changed it: for only now have I learned how to write quartets properly, as you will observe when you receive them.” A six-year chasm separates the last of op. 18, completed in 1800, and the three “Razumovsky” Quartets, Beethoven’s next endeavors in the medium. The intervening span was a period of vast stylistic growth, and so too were the thirteen years between 1811 and 1824, isolating the last of the “Middle” Quartets (op. 95 in F Minor) from those of the “Late” period.

Although the differences between the “Early,” “Middle” and “Late” quartets are readily apparent, all three groups of works clearly represent Beethoven’s respective phases at their highest peaks of development. Even in the early op. 18 Quartets, Beethoven is his own Titan, taking his stylistic and technical leads from Haydn and Mozart, to be sure, but inflecting them with an aura of his own. And in these op. 18 pieces, one also discovers motivic links and structural innovations that lead inescapably to the miracles of his last quartets a quarter-century later.

To call Beethoven’s string quartets influential would be to indulge in grievous understatement, for in fact, the creative ebullition - as stated in these miraculous works - sparked tremors that shocked the annals of composition for more than a century. Consider, among countless examples, the almost outright quotations from op. 132 in Mendelssohn’s early A minor String Quartet, op. 13, or the hovering of op. 127’s spirit about Schumann’s Piano Quartet, op. 47. The course of music history might have been completely different had Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert each lived another twenty years, but even lacking this conjectural extension, we can find premonition of Bartok’s quartets in the Grosse Fuge and in the

finale from op. 127. Beethoven not only forced the world of music to listen with new ears, new values, new aesthetics; he also forced new technical standards to come into being. He had little use for the status quo, although he borrowed from “tradition” even when setting it on its ears. To the critic who expressed bewilderment over one of the “Razumovsky” quartets, he replied, “Oh they are not for you, but for a later age!”. And to the hapless Schuppanzigh, who complained that one particularly hazardous passage was unplayable, he screamed, “Do you think that I care for your damned fiddle when the spirit seizes me?”. But for all his reputation for irascibility, Beethoven could, and sometimes did, accept criticism. When his publisher voiced concern that the Grosse Fuge was an overly arduous and aesthetically unsuitable ending for the op. 130 Quartet, he confounded all expectations and composed another, far more appropriate, finale. And with all the fist-shaking and gristly intensity, one also finds a lyricism and repose, not to mention a shattering humility. Have there ever been utterances so emotionally disarming as the “Hymn of Thanksgiving” from op. 132, the Lento Assai from op. 135, the Cavatina from op. 130? Or, for that matter, the wondrous slow movement of op. 18 no. 1?

It is for such miracles that Beethoven’s String Quartets have been regarded as perhaps the ultimate pinnacle of Western Music - one of civilization’s sublime wonders....

Quartet No. 4 in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4

C Minor was, for Beethoven, the *sturm und drang* key — the tonality of daemonic explosiveness and its necessary dichotomy, consoling lyricism. Thus the fourth quartet of Op. 18 may be set alongside such “typical” early Beethoven C Minor works as the “Pathétique” Piano Sonata, Op. 13, the third of the Op. 1 Piano Trios, the String Trio, Op. 19 No. 3 and the Third Piano Concerto, Op. 37. Further along in the aging process, of course, one encounters the Fifth Symphony and the last piano sonata, Op. 111.

The opening melody of the *Allegro ma non tanto* first movement is characterized by the locomotion of the cello’s repeated eighth notes (shortly taken up also by the viola and second violin) and by jabbing *sforzandos* that give a throbbing

tension to the theme's contours. Here, too, one finds (as in the aforementioned) Op. 9 String Trio) slashing, multiple stopped chords. The second subject is true to form: a consolingly lyrical melody "sung" by the second violin (with embroidery from the first) in the relative E-flat major. A terse closing cadence, played *staccato* and *pianissimo* is (naturally!) resolved by startling forte chords. In development, the materials are manipulated with masterful concision and ingenuity, exploding into a recapitulation in which the opening theme is now embellished with a secondary idea played by second violin and viola in contrary motion. The movement ends with a coda, wherein the opening *tema* climbs to new tensions and is finally brought to a halt by three resounding *fortissimo* chords.

The *Andante scherzoso quasi Allegretto*, with its fugal elements and dry *pianissimo* staccato, bears close analogy to the First Symphony's second movement. In essence, this quizzical intermezzo (in C Major) provides the necessary repose in this otherwise insistently tragic composition.

The Op. 18 No. 3, as noted, brought us a departure from textbook Classical form in which Beethoven varied his *da capo* after the Trio by asking for some of the reprise to be played an octave higher. And in the present work, he again varies his *da capo* — this time by specifying a faster tempo than before ("*La seconda volta si prende il Tempo più Allegro*"). Again, there is a dichotomy between almost Schubertian, *Trio* (in relative E-flat major) in which the first violin supplies a shimmering accompaniment in *moto perpetuo* triplets.

The finale (*Allegro*) is a headlong Rondo, notable for its terse economy of structure. The principal theme and its episodes follow each other without even the slightest discursiveness (development as such occurs only in the slight variation, by way of embellishment and altered accompaniment *ostinatos*, of the returning materials). The Rondo theme itself is built upon broken running thirds: the first episode is a gracious, flowing melody in A-flat major; the second episode, a "Turkish" section built upon a slashing upward figuration. Only toward the end, just before the final reprise of the Rondo and its jubilant dash to the finish line (all this in speeded up *Prestissimo* tempo), does the composer even consider expanding and reflecting upon the broken thirds of his main theme. The three final *fortissimo* shots come, of course, from the "Turkish" third episode.

Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132

As noted elsewhere, the A Minor Quartet, although published as “No. 15,” was the second of the three Galitzin works and was, in fact, finished about a month before the first version of Op. 130. But as also noted, Beethoven — working on these two works (and Op. 131 as well) simultaneously — frequently transferred ideas from one to the others...

Thus, the germ cell which opens this quartet is easily identified as a variant of that which Op. 130's first movement begins with (and also the *Große Fugue*). This ominous eight bar *Assai sostenuto*, played *pianissimo*, gives the impression of an introduction but, although never restated in literal quotation, it is fully developed along with the other materials of this amply proportioned movement. A first violin cadenza in *Allegro* tempo introduces the first subject, a passionate and rather melancholy theme in which dotted rhythms and repeated minor seconds play a substantial role. The second theme *piano* and *dolce*, is an expansively lyric melody, first “sung” by the second violin with the first violin taking over in almost Brahmsian fashion. Viola and cello accompany with alternating *non legato* ostinato. So fluid is Beethoven's working out, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact formal procedures used here: is the long coda, for instance, really a second development section as some have contended? However one hears it, the sense of dramatic shape is imposing.

The *Allegro ma non tanto* Scherzo, with its imitative (but not strictly canonic) contours owes a spiritual debt to Haydn (though the scale is, or course, far greater than in any work of Haydn or Mozart). Two distinct ideas are heard in the central Trio — a bagpipe-like drone of the first violins open A string is sustained over the same instrument's E string which reached high above the staff, and a dancing succession of *legato* scales played against crisp *staccato* quarter notes. A gruff unison passage sets the stage for a return of the bagpipe motif and the trio ebbs away peacefully. The scherzo returns, *da capo*.

Beethoven was not an old man chronologically when he wrote his late quartets, and, in fact, never lived to attain that status. Although he was only fifty-four years old when he wrote Op. 132, his health was becoming perilous. A serious

abdominal ailment is the spring of 1825 interrupted his work on this quartet and his subsequent recovery is immortalized by the poignant inscription over the *Molto Adagio*: “*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart*” (Hymn of thanksgiving to the Almighty, in the Lydian mode, offered by a convalescent). The blueprint for this veritable Cathedral in Sound (an ABABA) would hardly explain the miracle of this edifice — for this listener, the greatest slow movement in all of Western Music. In essence, Beethoven places in alternation his *Hymn to the Deity* (in which the use of the Lydian mode — here an F major scale with B natural in place of B flat — imparts an archaic spiritualism) with a second idea in bright D major, marked “*Neue Kraft fühlend*,” (feeling new strength). On its first reappearance, the Hymn is embellished by syncopations which, following a reprise of the D major episode (also embroidered), become even more complex. The music builds to a shattering climax, leaving the listener drained but strangely fulfilled.

An *Alla marcia, assai vivace*, in A major, returns the listener to reality. This aesthetically uncomplicated movement, in two-part (binary) form, with the second part exactly twice as long as the first, could almost have come from one of the Opus 18 quartets but how different it sounds in the altered context! It leads to a *recitativo* passage which some have likened to the ones which begin the Ninth Symphony’s choral finale but which, to this writer, bears even closer analogy to those fervent declamations of *Agnus Dei* in the *Missa Solemnis*’s last section. A cadenza for first violin leads directly into the fifth movement, an immense rondo marked *Allegro appassionato*. Again, the *Missa* is recalled, especially so in the weaving and churning counterpoint of the “development” section midway through the movement. But the most memorable and noteworthy facet of this finale is its uncanny premonition of Brahms in his fullest flower (note the throbbing heartbeat of the cello part in the *Liebeslieder*-like opening melody!) In the miraculous coda, the Brahmsian first theme assumes a new, agitated form and then the brooding gloom lifts in a shift to *maggiore*. The work ends in affirmation, another manifestation of that “*Neue Kraft*.”

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