

SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY
**SUMMER
FESTIVAL**

JULY 6, 2020

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4

Allegro ma non tanto

Scherzo: Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto

Menuetto: Allegretto

Allegro

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18 No. 5

Allegro

Menuetto

Andante cantabile

Allegro

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

1. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo—

2. Allegro molto vivace—

3. Allegro moderato—

4. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile—Più mosso—Andante moderato e lusinghiero—Adagio—

Allegretto—Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice—Allegretto—

5. Presto—

6. Adagio quasi un poco andante—

7. Allegro

Ehnes Quartet:

James Ehnes violin / **Amy Schwartz Moretti** violin / **Richard O'Neill** viola / **Edward Arron** cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770–1827)

String Quartet in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4 (1798)

Most recent SCMS performance: Summer 2014

Beethoven's 16 string quartets remain the iconic works that have defined the chamber music experience for two centuries. From the six Op. 18 quartets of his youth, through the dramatic works of his adventuresome middle years, to the last unparalleled masterpieces of his full maturity, Beethoven built upon the great quartets of his immediate predecessors Haydn and Mozart and set a standard of excellence approached but never surpassed. As a body of music, Beethoven's quartets explore and express the vast range of emotion of a composer whose heart beat to the rhythm of our shared humanity. The Op. 18 quartets, composed between 1798 and 1800, show mastery of the mature classical style of Mozart and Haydn with suggestions of the more assertive style of the middle quartets.

Despite being listed as No. 4, the darkly dramatic C-minor Quartet was the last composed of the Op. 18 set and the only one for which no earlier sketches have been found. Notably, it's the sole work from that initial offering cast in C minor, his favored key for dramatic minor-key utterance. (Think the Op. 1, No. 3 Piano Trio, which confounded Haydn, the 3rd Piano Concerto, 5th Symphony, and many others.)

The opening movement is a dark and pulsating *Allegro ma non tanto* that mirrors his inner turmoil. Almost orchestral in its top-to-bottom deployment of the four instruments, it abounds in powerful chords, unexpected near-silences, and abrupt syncopations, and surely led to tsk-tsk-ing among early audiences used to classical decorum. A climactic coda ends the movement with dark forcefulness.

One might reasonably expect a slow and touching *Andante* to follow the opening salvo. Yet Beethoven offers a *Scherzo: Andante scherzando quasi allegretto*. Primarily polyphonic, its atmosphere is largely witty. Three distinct themes populate the movement, though all of them include a shared

three-note figure that both provides unity and variation among them.

A *Menuetto: Allegretto* follows, far more serious than one might assume to characterize that courtly dance. Dollops of chromatic harmony darken matters, as does syncopated passagework. The mid-movement *Trio* abounds in quick triplets from the first violin, a sound one also hears decades later in Schubert.

The concluding Rondo finale, *Allegro*, conjures the sound world of Hungarian folk tunes, whose country and culture is but a stones-throw from Vienna, where young Beethoven spent most of his life once he freed himself from the relative musical conservatism of Bonn, city of his birth. Filled with zest balanced by lyricism, the music nods to his erstwhile teacher Haydn, including his predecessor's musical humor.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18 No. 5 (1798)

Most recent SCMS performance: Summer 2015

The opening *Allegro* is as upbeat and bracing as the C-minor quartet is dark and anxious. Beethoven balances lovely individual lines with strong and brash harmonies. Again, with an eye on future composition, dynamic contrasts abound, animated by signature *sforzandos* that invariably add power to much of his ensuing music. Brief silences and forays into the minor add further emotional variety. No doubt early listeners and string players would have been a bit confused by Beethoven's unruly musical behavior!

Altering typical movement order, the *Allegro* is followed by a graceful *Menuetto*, reflective of Mozart's courtly equivalents. While less assertive than Beethoven's transformative and assertive *scherzos*, this movement revels in potent silences. The *Trio* section conjures the world of the rustic dance, which figures prominently in his music throughout his life, including the Ninth Symphony, composed only three years before his death.

The third movement, *Andante cantabile* (the longest movement), is yet another homage to Mozart,

revealing kinship with the earlier composer's Quartet in A Major, K. 464 (same key as this work, but not of this movement, which is in D Major), which some have argued was the model for Op. 18, No. 5 (actually written as No. 4, but that's another story). Others, however, have noted a family resemblance to Mozart's profound Divertimento (actually a string trio, K. 563). Whatever the source of Beethoven's inspiration, the movement's sweet, unhurried, and utterly beguiling theme serves as the basis for five variations that vary in mood, texture, and coloration throughout—all enhanced by shifts into the minor and sudden moves into unexpected chordal harmonies.

Mozart's spirit is apparent in the concluding *Allegro*, a joy-filled and energetic voyage mediated by his predecessor's sheer grace and buoyancy. Still, the Beethoven "we know" intrudes effectively in the development section, which is high in muscularity and dramatic asides. The movement also revels in animated counterpoint, to-and-fro conversational repartee, and ends with a brief, almost peaceful coda.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in C-sharp minor, *Op. 131 (1826)*

Most recent SCMS performance: Summer 2000

The five "late" quartets and *Grosse Fuge* (the original finale to his Op. 130 quartet) all date from 1824-26 and show Beethoven at his most reflective, experimental, rhythmically quirky, and harmonically audacious. This was music that puzzled many performers and listeners at the time. Its strangeness was long attributed by some to his deafness. Tchaikovsky thought him mad, yet in our own time an appreciation for their depth and strikingly "modern" tone bears out Beethoven's admonition that this was, indeed, music for another time.

In 1822, the Russian Prince Nikolai Borisovich Gallitzin, an amateur cellist himself, had asked Beethoven to compose "one, two, or three" string quartets. After the composer completed the first three, his inner muse led him to keep on with the

project, ultimately adding two more of the "late" quartets as well as the abovementioned *Grosse Fuge*. Each of the "late" quartets has its staunch advocates, but apparently the composer voiced a preference for the String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131. On hearing the piece Schubert is said to have mused aloud "After this, what is left for us to write." Later Wagner wrote an impassioned essay on the Op. 131 Quartet.

Beethoven worked on the C-sharp minor Quartet in 1825-26 and dedicated it to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim in gratitude for having helped the composer's nephew Karl after the young man's failed suicide attempt that followed years of well-meaning abuse from his uncle. (Beethoven had wrested control of the boy upon the death of his brother, asserting to the court that the young man's mother was unqualified to assume responsibility for the task. In a shameful display of Beethoven's bad side, his fame led to an unfair court judgment in his favor.)

As part of Beethoven's explorations of new modes of composition, Op. 131 is laid out in seven continuous movements played without pause. Within it we encounter many of the composer's frequently employed elements: theme and variation, melodies inspired by folk music, a feel for improvisation, complex yet immediately engaging fugal writing, and imaginative sonorities.

A short opening movement, *Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo* is nothing less than a skillful fugue put to the service of intense emotion. Wagner described it as "...the most melancholic sentiment expressed in music." An equally brief *Allegro molto vivace* in sonata form follows, based on a single dance-like folk-like theme in 6/8 time.

The third movement, *Allegro moderato* sounds as if appropriated from an opera recitative bearing a palpably improvisatory quality. Lasting less than a minute it leads directly into the fourth movement [see title page for its lengthy tempo indications], clearly the emotional heart of the Quartet. It is nothing less than a set of six variations based on a simple theme in A major. The *Adagio, ma non troppo*

e semplice variation must be counted as among Beethoven's most sublime and spiritual utterances.

A brilliant *scherzo* marked *Presto*—unusual but not unheard of in being cast in 2/4 time rather than typical 3/4—returns us to earth (or at least to our solar system) with an especially mercurial theme touched with humor and unexpected pauses. The fifth movement, a brief *Adagio quasi un poco andante* touches the heart with a sad lamenting theme that recalls the opening movement's fugue theme. The Quartet ends with a galloping *Allegro* filled with agitated dotted (short/long) rhythmic urgings; the pace pauses centrally for a calmer contemplative episode before returning to the *Allegro* tempo.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe
