CMS Co-Artistic Director David Finckel will give a pre-concert lecture one hour before each concert in the Daniel and Joanna S. Rose Studio.

THE BEETHOVEN STRING QUARTETS
PERFORMED BY THE DANISH STRING QUARTET

FRIDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 7, 2020, AT 7:30
Quartet in D major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 3 (1798–99)
Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 1 (1798–1800)
Quartet in G major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 2 (1799–1800)

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 9, 2020, AT 5:00
Quartet in A major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 5 (1799–1800)
Quartet in C minor for Strings, Op. 18, No. 4 (1799–1800)
Quartet in B-flat major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 6 (1800)

TUESDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 11, 2020, AT 7:30
Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 59, No. 1, “Razumovsky” (1806)
Quartet in E minor for Strings, Op. 59, No. 2, “Razumovsky” (1806)
Quartet in C major for Strings, Op. 59, No. 3, “Razumovsky” (1806)

FRIDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 14, 2020, AT 7:30
Quartet in E-flat major for Strings, Op. 74, “Harp” (1809)
Quartet in F minor for Strings, Op. 95, “Serioso” (1810–11)

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 16, 2020, AT 5:00
Quartet in A minor for Strings, Op. 132 (1825)
Quartet in B-flat major for Strings, Op. 130 (1825)
Quartet for Strings, Op. 133, “Grosse Fuge” (1825)

TUESDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 18, 2020, AT 7:30
Quartet in C-sharp minor for Strings, Op. 131 (1825–26)
Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 135 (1826)

PLEASE TURN OFF CELL PHONES AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES.
Photographing, sound recording, or videotaping this performance is prohibited.
Dear Listener,

Welcome to the centerpiece of the Chamber Music Society’s 50th anniversary season: the Beethoven Quartet Cycle.

The complete Beethoven string quartets were first presented by CMS during the 1986–87 season by the Emerson String Quartet, then ensemble-in-residence. Since then, the cycle has been presented numerous times, from the entire cycle by the Orion Quartet in 2000 to shared cycles by individual string quartets. The perspectives offered by the variety of performers are fascinating, and we believe no audience should ever be denied, for long, the immense spiritual inspiration these works provide.

Cycles of music have been created over time by composers especially drawn to specific genres as vehicles of self-expression and advancing their art. We have distinguished quartet cycles from Haydn and Mozart, from Bartók and Shostakovich, all of which reveal the composers in multi-dimensional views. We have Wagner’s Ring Cycle. From Beethoven, we have his nine symphonies, six piano trios, and ten violin sonatas. But none of these cycles, as great as they are, compare to the Beethoven quartet cycle. In these 16 quartets, Beethoven not only tells his life story, but re-imagines the art of music as no one has ever done. Drawing from music’s distant past, from his present, and even from the future, Beethoven created a body of work that qualifies as true desert-island music. If necessary, one need not hear anything thing else: these quartets say it all, and more.

Enjoy the concert,

David Finckel              Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS
ABOUT
THE BEETHOVEN STRING QUARTET CYCLE

We are sitting in this beautiful concert hall, all of us wearing our finest clothes. The shirts have been ironed and some of us groomed our beards. We are gathered around Beethoven and his string quartets, all 16 of them: This is a Beethoven cycle in all its glory!

And in some ways, this is all wrong.

We—and generations of music lovers before us—have created this story about Beethoven as a semi-god. He is on the highest of pedestals and his music is treated as Moses’ Ten Commandments: Behold! The Perfection, the Greatness! Beethoven’s quartets are indeed pretty well-crafted, and they form a weighty artistic statement that still resonates today. But perfection and greatness aren’t the main reasons we are still revisiting Beethoven’s music 250 years after his birth. Rather, the attraction of a Beethoven cycle lies in the imperfections, the raw directness, and an omnipresent fragile humanity.

Alice Tully Hall is a beautiful, shining concert hall and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center is a premier institution in classical music. And obviously we dress up when we gather to listen to and celebrate music. But a Beethoven cycle shouldn’t be treated as an ‘institution.’ The musical travel we all will embark upon these weeks isn’t just about shining, big moments. It isn’t about impressive endings with bows held high above our heads. It isn’t about eternally beautiful slow movements. Or scherzo movements where only a true connoisseur can locate the down beat. A Beethoven cycle is much more than all of that. We will explore emotions and expressions so complex that only music can convey them. We will experience a full life in music. And when we finally enter the realm of the late quartets, we will have ended up in a place where shiny surroundings and ironed shirts are of no importance. It is a place where there is only music left.

Danish String Quartet
FRIDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 7, 2020, AT 7:30 • 4,054TH CONCERT

Alice Tully Hall, Starr Theater, Adrienne Arsht Stage
Home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, violin
ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, viola
FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Quartet in D major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 3 (1798–99)
› Allegro
› Andante con moto
› Allegro
› Presto
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 1 (1798–1800)
› Allegro con brio
› Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato
› Scherzo: Allegro molto
› Allegro
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in G major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 2 (1799–1800)
› Allegro
› Adagio cantabile
› Scherzo: Allegro
› Allegro molto quasi presto
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

PLEASE TURN OFF CELL PHONES AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES.
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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

We applaud the Danish String Quartet for performing the cycle in the exact order of composition. In this first concert, we will hear Beethoven taking a giant step into the quartet genre. Mozart had been dead for seven years; Haydn was in his late 60s and tiring of composing. Beethoven already had an impressive selection of works well known in Vienna, including his Op. 1 piano trios and first piano concerto. The field was clear for Beethoven to claim the mantle of the world’s greatest composer, and with his Opus 18 quartets, he planted another cornerstone of his musical fortress. All six quartets of Op. 18 are of different character: Op. 18, No. 3 is, for the most part, friendly and warm; Op. 18, No. 1 is more obsessive and restless; and Op. 18, No. 2 shows Beethoven on his best behavior, ready for the company of high society. All three quartets show clearly that Beethoven was, at that time, a composer with powers of invention, technical skill, and the capacity to entertain beyond anyone’s imagination.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

Beethoven—and the string quartet as an ensemble—came out of the Viennese Classical period. It was a time when music was supposed to be structured, elegant, and not disturb a wine drinking emperor too much. It should be in the background, nice and smooth. The Beethoven quartets Op. 18 are a part of this tradition: Everything is pretty rounded, everything sounds nice. But under the surface, there is constant tension; it feels like Beethoven isn’t comfortable with the box he is navigating inside. He wants music to be the center of attention: Music should disturb, not be in the background. David Finckel asked us to play Op. 18, No. 1 at Music@Menlo some years back. At that point, we had already performed most of the late Beethoven quartets, so we thought this would be an easy ride. It wasn’t. The Op. 18 quartets are surprisingly unidiomatic and one constantly ends in the wrong end of the bow or worse. There can be a real sense of struggle that almost aids Beethoven’s vision: Together we fight to win the attention of the audience. We need to make that emperor put down his wine and listen.

—Danish String Quartet
In 1798, Beethoven, at age 27 a rising young composer in Vienna, was commissioned by his patron Prince Lobkowitz for six string quartets. They became Op. 18, published in two sets of three in 1800. This was at once a big opportunity for him and a daunting project, but he was prepared for it, having just warmed up with the splendid String Trios of Op. 9. In the later 18th century, string quartets were the most popular medium of chamber music, played not in public but in the parlors and music rooms of the aristocracy and the well-to-do. Beethoven was familiar with house music because most of his career as a piano virtuoso was within that milieu. Though often there were moonlighting professionals involved, house music performers were mostly amateurs, some of them highly skilled, but still inevitably a mixed bag.

Over the years hundreds of string quartets had been written for that setting. Traditionally they were relatively light works, not too hard to play, geared for the sociable atmosphere of house concerts mounted for a small group of listeners, who during the music might be chatting, playing cards, sampling a buffet. Often, quartets were done with no audience, for the pleasure of the players. Since the players’ skills were unpredictable, quartets were largely written to feature the first violin, the other instruments in supporting roles.

In the later 18th century that paradigm for the style and setting of quartets was not so much changed as amplified by Haydn, who wrote some 68 string quartets in the course of his career. In the process he enlarged the ambition of the genre, among other things making the four instruments more nearly equal in the musical discourse. Largely because of Haydn, the string quartet acquired a reputation as the most sophisticated and important chamber music genre, written mainly for the appreciation of connoisseurs, often described as a conversation of four equals, and revealing not only the composer’s craft but his most refined and intimate voice. In his own time Haydn was dubbed “father of the string quartet” (and likewise with symphonies). In other words, nearly single-handedly he created the sense of a string quartet being up to the standards of a symphony.
The attraction of a Beethoven cycle lies in the imperfections, the raw directness, and an omnipresent fragile humanity.

—Danish String Quartet
From the beginning Beethoven was not afraid of anybody, but he was also very aware, genre by genre and medium by medium, of what the competition was.

were largely premiered by a portly gentleman named Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whom Beethoven first met as a brilliant teenaged violinist. Schuppanzigh was the first musician in Europe to make his name primarily as a chamber music performer; he led several important groups and established the first public subscription series. In his maturity Beethoven was going to write revolutionary quartets, and his leading partner in that revolution was Schuppanzigh, who premiered most of them (and, incidentally, sat as concertmaster in the premiere of all the symphonies). Without the hefty and for an artist unlikely-looking Schuppanzigh, the story of Beethoven’s string quartets would have been quite different, and so would have been the history of music.

So the tone of the Op. 18 quartets is largely contemporary rather than prophetic. But these are by no means apprentice works. They show Beethoven as already a master craftsman, with a mature understanding of form and proportion (though that understanding would greatly deepen over the years), who had already found much of his voice though had not fully settled into it. Still, for all their relative modesty and 18th-century tone, the Op. 18 quartets are ambitious in their way: expressive, widely contrasting in mood and color, as varied as any set by Haydn or Mozart, and full of ideas particular to Beethoven. If his one-time teacher Haydn was their main model, most of the time they sound not at all like Haydn.

This program begins with Op. 18 No. 3 in D major, the first to be written, which is to say that it is, as far as we know, the first complete quartet of Beethoven’s life. It is relatively conventional, easygoing from the first movement’s genial opening featuring the first violin, the central development section uncharacteristically short and undramatic for Beethoven. But the movement also has a tendency to slip into a pensive mood. That mood takes over in a poignant and introspective slow movement in the distant key of B-flat major, which branches into deep-flat keys including the rare and esoteric E-flat minor, a dusky tonality that Beethoven liked. The third movement is neither the traditional minuet nor exactly the faster and usually jollier scherzo that Haydn invented and Beethoven would favor. For one thing, despite its bright key of D major it again has the pensive atmosphere that marks the quartet. All that vanishes in the Presto finale, an effervescent romp full of jokes and Haydnesque rhythmic quirks.

After reading through the quartets with his group, violinist Schuppanzigh advised placing the F major, the second composed, as No. 1 in the published set. Beethoven agreed—it made for a more energetic start. (Quartets were usually issued in collections, but that does not mean they were planned to be performed together. Still, a variety of keys and moods were expected among the pieces.) The F major has the most arresting opening of the group, and may be the most consistent throughout. An edgy first movement is driven by an obsessive repetition of a single figure whose significance is rhythmic as much as varied as any set by Haydn or Mozart, and full of ideas particular to Beethoven. If his one-time teacher Haydn was their main model, most of the time they sound not at all like Haydn.
as melodic. In the first measures of the F major, the figure is presented blankly in a quiet unison, then in a yearning phrase, then in a more aggressive forte. Which is to say that the theme is a blank slate on which changing feelings are going to be written throughout the movement. The opening idea also presents the leading motif of the whole quartet, a turn figure. Between the published version of the F major and the original version, with advice from old hand Emanuel Förster, Beethoven went back and made dozens of changes in details large and small: extending thematic connections, tightening proportions and tonal relations. In the process he trimmed the appearances of the first-movement turn figure from 130 repetitions to 104.

The second movement of the F major is one of the most compelling stretches in Op. 18. Beethoven played over a draft of the movement for a friend, who said it reminded him of the parting of two lovers. Beethoven replied that it was based on the ending of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, where the lovers die. The movement is in D minor, a key in which Beethoven tended to find a kind of singing tragic quality. The movement is slow and warmly impassioned, the main theme a long-breathed, sorrowful song. In the middle a new figure intrudes, like the whirling of fate, and that figure swells relentlessly to a deathly conclusion. There follow a brilliant and delightful scherzo and a briskly dancing, a bit

An edgy first movement is driven by an obsessive repetition of a single figure... the theme is a blank slate on which changing feelings are going to be written throughout the movement.

Op. 18, No. 1

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
Wispy finale that leaves listeners pleased, if perhaps puzzled as to how all this adds up.

The next quartet in the set, No. 2 in G major, is essentially jaunty and ironic from beginning to end, starting with the three distinct gestures of its opening, each like a smiling tip of the hat to the 18th century in general and Haydn in particular. Still, after a genial exposition the development section gets into some more shadowed and intricate places, and that leads to a recapitulation that amounts to a further development. In short, in material and expression the opening movement of the G major is more involved than the playful beginning would suggest, and its ending is quiet and ambiguous. The slow movement starts in an elegantly galant tone, in 3/4, but that is punctured by an eruption of mocking 2/4 serving as trio. From there the complexities continue: the nominal return of the opening material is invaded by filigree recalling the opening of the first movement. Meanwhile in much of the quartet and this slow movement in particular, rather than being relegated to the bass line the cello is a full participant in the dialogue. For third movement Beethoven again writes not the traditional minuet but a jovial scherzo. The dashing finale, led off with a pert tune by the cello alone, leaves behind the emotional vacillations that shaded the first two movements, ending the story with fun and games.

Thus the first three Op. 18 quartets were on the surface lodged in the 18th century quartet tradition, not the Beethoven the new generation would embrace for his boldness and innovation: the Romantic generation exalted revolutionaries. But the pieces are masterful, appealing, often moving works within their context, and part of that is their attention to the rich voice of the cello. Haydn had begun to emancipate the cello, making the quartet more nearly a dialogue of equals. In his habitual fashion of taking the past and expanding and intensifying it, Beethoven through the immense journey of his string quartets would take that idea to its conclusion. ✦

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.
DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, violin
ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, viola
FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Quartet in A major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 5
(1799–1800)
› Allegro
› Menuetto
› Andante cantabile
› Allegro
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD,
SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

BEETHOVEN
Quartet in C minor for Strings, Op. 18, No. 4
(1799–1800)
› Allegro ma non tanto
› Scherzo: Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto
› Menuetto: Allegretto
› Allegro
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD,
SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN
Quartet in B-flat major for Strings, Op. 18, No. 6
(1800)
› Allegro con brio
› Adagio ma non troppo
› Scherzo: Allegro
› La Malinconia: Adagio—Allegretto quasi allegro
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD,
SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Today’s performance covers the second part of Beethoven’s milestone Op. 18 cycle of six quartets. The composition (and performance) order vividly illustrates the composer’s ability to swing the emotional pendulum wider that ever experienced by listeners of his age. We first encounter Beethoven in a generous, good-natured, and respectful state as he pays tribute with Op. 18, No. 5 to a specific quartet by Mozart, most obviously mimicking the slow movement of K. 464, a genteel set of variations in D major. But immediately, even before intermission, we are assaulted with Beethoven’s angriest quartet yet, in his signature stormy key of C minor. One has only to recall works like his Pathétique piano sonata, his Fifth Symphony, and even his Third Piano Trio, all in C minor, to know that Beethoven had a powerful use for the key of C minor. And finally, we end the Op. 18 cycle with Beethoven already straining the confines of medium, adding a significant, futuristic movement to the Quartet No. 6 in B-flat, and leaving us in a state of intense anticipation as to what the next chapter of Beethoven’s string quartet journey might produce.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

We are still in the Viennese Classical mood. But things aren’t just jolly good. Op. 18, No. 4 is a dramatic ride in C minor, the key signature Beethoven would often turn to when he wanted things to be stormy. Again this is hardly background music for the rich elite. It is a testosterone-filled quartet that we found very attractive when we were in our formative quartet years. Now we are sleep-deprived dads, but the music is as exciting to perform as ever. A notable moment in tonight’s concert is the last movement of Op. 18, No. 6, the famous La Malinconia. Often, popular music has quite obvious musical characters: ‘This is sad music. Now it is hopeful.’ etc. But the La Malinconia movement is hard to put in emotional boxes, even if Beethoven gives us an idea with the title. This can be frustrating for musicians eager to sort out every emotion in rehearsals, but it is also the reason we are still circling around this music hundreds of years later.

—Danish String Quartet
Beethoven wrote the quartets of Op. 18 over two years, interspersed with other pieces, learning and growing as he went, though in the whole set he kept these pieces grounded in the Classical string quartet as his teacher Haydn had defined it: a dialogue of four voices, written for largely amateur performers in private concerts. As usual, the six quartets were issued in two editions as a set, with a concern for a variety of moods and keys. In a set there would usually be one or two in a minor key. That is to say that in the generally optimistic Classical frame of mind, minor keys were not on a par with major; they were special. And with Beethoven already, the key of C minor was going to be the most distinctively special, the tonality of the Pathétique Sonata, the Fifth Symphony, and a row of works in import tending to dark unto demonic.

Quartet No. 5 in A major begins with a delicately wispy theme. That tone and texture will persist through a mostly soft movement, though there is a discreet touch of tension, partly resulting from an unexpected E minor second theme—the only really unexpected thing in the movement. The A major second movement is a Menuetto, that genre displaced from its usual third slot in a work. Carrying on from the first movement it begins quietly, with a gentle duet of violins. The gentleness persists, except for a sudden aggressive fortissimo that has no particular repercussions. The trio, unusually still in A major, is a lilting and placid dance. Then the surprise of the quartet, an Andante theme and variations nearly twice as long as any of the other movements, its theme another placid one. While generally sticking to that vein, the variations get into faster rhythms and busier textures than have been heard so far—but still whispery, with hardly a forte in sight until the suddenly boisterous fifth variation, after which the music returns to pianissimo.

The finale is a lighthearted and scampering but still quiet Allegro with much tossing around of figures among the instruments. It is in sonata form rather than the usual last-movement rondo. Just when we wonder if it will ever break out of its restraint, the development section is a mock-ferocious stretch that actually
In the generally optimistic Classical frame of mind, minor keys were not on a par with major; they were special.

builds to *fortissimo*. The end of the piece rises to *forte*, but at the last second, as if mocking our expectations, it comes to rest on a mild soft chord. Thus ends a work that has been an exercise in understatement.

Quartet No. 4 in C minor is the only minor-key work in Op. 18, this one more aspiring to than attaining the fierce dynamism of what came to be called Beethoven’s C minor mood. Beginning with a passionate theme on the dark-toned G string of the first violin, moving to stark across-the-strings chords, the opening movement is serviceable but perhaps more interesting as a prophecy of his C minor works to come. The prophecy includes the da da da dum rhythm of the first two bars, which will be a motif throughout the quartet; it is an early appearance of that figure that will haunt the Fifth Symphony, but also give the Fourth Piano Concerto some of its lilting grace. The C major second movement is titled *Scherzo*, with the tousled tempo marking *Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto*, presumably meaning that it’s a lighthearted movement that is actually kind of deliberate but should have the effect of being faster than it is. In the end the temper of the movement is quite original, not a usual scherzo at all, its mood describable as ironically gracious.

As it turns out, that singular movement is replacing the usual slow movement, because it is followed by a *Menuetto* whose theme in mood and color recalls the opening of the first movement, and it also has something like the stark chords of that movement. From a shaded C minor there is a turn to a breathless A-flat major for the trio. The finale is another original sort of movement: a gypsy rondo, the C minor here intricately scampering, with short repeated segments that make for a bit of a relentless effect. For contrast, the B theme of the rondo is flowing and elegant; those sorts of contrasts will mark the music throughout. A *Prestissimo* coda winds up the most dynamic and interesting of the four movements. Its droll closing gesture tells us that we are not required to take it all too seriously.

No. 6 in B-flat major was written last of the set. Here more overtly and eloquently than in any of its Op. 18 neighbors, Beethoven showed his hand in setting out to say something beyond music, going manifestly into the stuff of life. To that end, he shaped a narrative both personal and universal. The brilliance of this quartet is the way it joins the expressive and the formal over the course of the work. Meanwhile it provides a prophecy of places Beethoven is headed in his full maturity.

The B-flat Quartet begins on a striding, muscular theme, a touch generic and foursquare. It is a Haydnesque theme, and Beethoven is going to play a Haydnesque game with it: set up the listener’s expectations, then subvert them. Whereas Haydn usually pursued that game with a wink for the connoisseurs who would get it, Beethoven plays it in earnest. What the listener expects after that beginning is for the music to remain in uncomplicated, 18th-century high spirits. Accordingly, the tone of the second theme is elegant and refined, the rhythm with a touch of marching tread. Then something intrudes, a shadow: the elegant march strays...
into unexpected keys, arriving with a bump on the chromatic chord called the Neapolitan, a harmonic effect that often has something unsettling about it. After a few seconds the shadow seems to pass, the music shakes itself back into F major, all is well again. Nothing really troubles the movement further until the recap, except that in the development the jolly tone gets sometimes a touch edgy, and in a couple of places the music trails off strangely into silence, as if it has lost its train of thought.

The second movement begins in a blithe and galant mode, but that is made to be spoiled. In the middle part the music slips into E-flat minor, one of Beethoven’s most fraught keys, usually implying inward sorrow. Here it is an eerie, spidery, keening whisper based on a twisting motif. Then, as in the first movement, there is a sudden clearing back to the elegant mood of the opening. With intricate cross-accents that defy the listener to find the meter or even the beat, the scherzo plays another Haydn game, his fool-the-ear rhythms. Yet as the music goes on, the tone begins to feel excessive unto obsessive: not innocent but rather manic gaiety. So it is not entirely an intrusion when, at the end of the trio, the music falls for a moment into a strange, shouting B-flat minor before the repeat back into the scherzo.

Then comes the most arresting and significant page in Op. 18, a slow passage serving as extended introduction to the last movement. Over it Beethoven placed an Italian title: La Malinconia, “Melancholy.” More than a small movement, striking in itself, this is the heart of a narrative that began with a few passing shadows in movement one, expanded to a mysterious, spidery whispering in movement two, and sent the scherzo reeling nearly out of control. Beethoven’s portrait of melancholy’s devious onset begins mildly, in B-flat major.

Beethoven’s portrait of melancholy’s devious onset begins mildly, in B-flat major.
major. It is an echo of the second theme in movement one, with a smoothing out of the same marching figure, the mood again elegant, the same little turn figure like a gesture with a lace handkerchief at an aristocratic ball. Then the cello begins to sink chromatically; as in the second theme of movement one, there is a sudden darkening. This time the darkness lingers. The music falls into a slow, steady tread, the little turn comes back, keys drift aimlessly. A new section begins, its theme a lugubrious version of the twisting motif in the middle of movement two. The once-elegant little turn comes back, whispering and crying over and over like some inescapable bête noire, the harmony oozing around it.

All this is to say that in rhythm, harmony, and melody, La Malinconia had been foreshadowed from the beginning, starting with a darkness that shadows the second theme of the first movement. After the scherzo, when we are expecting an allegro finale, melancholy seems to arise suddenly. But it had been lurking even in the blithe moments, as melancholy does in life. In the music it is present in strange diversions in harmony, thoughts trailing off, things manically exaggerated.

The Malinconia movement ends with a high cry and a dying sigh. The finale breaks out attacca subito, with a driving, dancing gaiety that we take for an escape from melancholy. Yet something is subtly off; the color and the rhythm are wrong. The main theme is carried in the first violin mostly on the milder and darker middle strings rather than on the bright and brilliant E string. The accompaniment, rather than flowing with the meter, has lurching accents on the offbeats.

Suddenly, a crashing halt. La Malinconia returns with its deathly tread, its nasty little turn figure, its convulsive cries. It recedes, the dance tries to start up again, fails. Melancholy takes another step, pauses, waits. Tentatively, searching for the right key, the dance tries again until it finds the movement’s proper key of B-flat. It will not be stopped this time, or not quite; before the end there is a slowing, a few turns quiet and hesitant, inward. Then a fierce rush to the cadence, fortissimo. Melancholy is banished for the moment, but only for the moment.

Melancholy was an old, familiar companion to Beethoven. After his mother died when he was 16, he wrote in a letter that he had asthma, but also that “I have been suffering from melancholia, which in my case is almost as great a torture as my illness.” He knew the demon of melancholy like he knew the arcana of harmony and counterpoint. For Beethoven, Op. 18, No. 6, is in its both technical and psychological dimensions a manifestly mature work and a gathering of prophecies musical, dramatic, and expressive.

All the same, on the whole, Op. 18 was not intended to challenge anything or anybody. If by 1800 Beethoven had known where he wanted to take the genres of symphony and string quartet, he would have taken them there. But he did not know yet where he wanted to go with them, so he proceeded warily, trying one thing and another, one voice and another, and biding his time. When he returned to the string quartet, six years later, he would transform the medium once and for all. ♦

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.
The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

TUESDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 11, 2020, AT 7:30 • 4,057TH CONCERT

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DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
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FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 59, No. 1, “Razumovsky” (1806)
› Allegro
› Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
› Adagio molto e mesto
› Theme russe: Allegro
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in E minor for Strings, Op. 59, No. 2, “Razumovsky” (1806)
› Allegro
› Molto adagio
› Allegretto
› Finale: Presto
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in C major for Strings, Op. 59, No. 3, “Razumovsky” (1806)
› Introduzione: Andante con moto—Allegro vivace
› Andante con moto quasi allegretto
› Menuetto: Grazioso
› Allegro molto
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

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The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

When we left Beethoven in 1800, he had let loose a body of quartets, the Op. 18s, that put him on a par with the greatest quartet composers of his era: Mozart and Haydn. Now, in 1806, he had passed through the most personal crisis that he would experience until his final illness. Beethoven’s decision to forge ahead for his art, despite the devastating embarrassment and humiliation he felt because of his encroaching deafness, changed not only his personality but his music. And at this point, when Beethoven’s music changed, western classical music itself had to change. Beethoven was already known as the greatest composer of his day, and against so many odds, he rose to the occasion with a decade of works of such power and popularity that they likely form the nucleus of what many of us consider our desert island music library. The three quartets called “Razumovsky,” Op. 59, out-did every quartet that preceded them. They were the longest, most difficult, most profound, and most advanced string quartets ever composed. Without them as examples of possibility, we would not have quartets the likes of Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden,” Schoenberg’s First Quartet, Bartók’s Fifth Quartet, or Shostakovich’s 15th. Like three very different people—the first magisterial, the second mercurial, and the third dazzling—these quartets are three of chamber music’s epic novels, each in a world of its own.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

Now we have left the safe shores of the early Op. 18 quartets and will sail into completely different waters. At one point in a rehearsal, we compared the Beethoven cycle to Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. If the Op. 18 quartets have the feel of good times in Hobbiton, the Op. 59s are where we will really embark on our big travel. We will climb mountains, kill orcs, crawl through tunnels, fall in love, and maybe save the world from a one-eyed evil lord (not to be confused with one of our violinists, Frederik, who is mostly a very sweet one-eyed lord). The Op. 59s are the quartets of great stories, they are like operas for a string quartet. And they are long: Tonight’s concert is like serving three main courses in a row. The end of the evening is the infamous fugue from Op. 59, No. 3. Beethoven wrote an insanely fast metronome marking for this particular movement, and he asks the viola player to start alone, thus creating the first viola joke in music history.

—Danish String Quartet
In 1808 appeared a review: “Three new, very long and difficult violin quartets by Beethoven, dedicated to the Russian ambassador Count Razumovsky, also attract the attention of all connoisseurs. They are deep in conception and marvelously worked out, but not universally comprehensible, with the possible exception of the third one, in C major, which by virtue of its individuality, melody, and harmonic power must win over every educated friend of music.” The three quartets, Op. 59, had premiered in Vienna, maybe in violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh’s short-lived public quartet series, and they had been shaped with that virtuoso ensemble in mind. Beethoven wrote them probably between April and November of 1806. In these quartets a historic turn in chamber music began, away from private amateur performance and toward programs played by professionals in public venues. Chamber music was beginning to move out of salons and into concert halls.

In some six years, between the completion of the Op. 18 quartets and the Op. 59 Razumovsky Quartets, Beethoven had gone from a young composer trying on voices and attempting to escape from the shadow of Haydn and Mozart, to an artist in his prime widely called their peer. In the Razumovskys he made another medium his own. With them he intended to repeat what he had done with the Eroica Symphony: make a familiar genre bigger, more ambitious, more varied, more personal. The presence of Schuppanzigh and his men allowed him to take quartets wherever he wanted to go with them. The Op. 18 quartets published in 1800 had been appealing and well-crafted, but what Beethoven had learned since then in power and subtlety of expression and form is manifest in abundance.

The most immediate revolution in Op. 59 had to do with the scope of the difficulties. In scale and ambition they are the most symphonic quartets to that time, harder on both players and listeners than any quartet before, even in a medium traditionally meant for connoisseurs. There is no mystery in the slow reception these quartets received. The electricity, aggressiveness, in some ways sheer strangeness of the Razumovskys are collectively breathtaking. Even some of their beauties are strange.
The electricity, aggressiveness, in some ways sheer strangeness of the Razumovskys are collectively breathtaking. Even some of their beauties are strange.

But revolutionary does not always equal loud. The beginning of No. 1 in F major is a quiet pulsation in the upper strings while the cello sings a spacious, flowing, gently beautiful tune rather like a folk song. At the time, an extended lyric line for the cello under barely moving harmony was simply outlandish. Beethoven is continuing his campaign to free the instrument from a life mainly toiling on the bass line. A melodic cello will be a steady feature of the quartet. As he had been doing in his piano sonatas, from here on Beethoven fashioned each string quartet with a distinctive color and texture. Theme and harmony and rhythm are no longer the exclusive subjects of a work; now its very sound is distinctive, as if with each quartet he set out to reinvent the medium. The three numbers of Op. 59 are a collection of unforgettable individuals: one singing, one mysterious, one ebullient.

As Beethoven began work on the F major, he pored over a collection of Russian folk songs in order to comply with a commission requirement from his patron: he had to use a Russian theme in each piece. He picked a tuneful one for the main theme of the finale. Then he wrote the piece in some degree back to front, basing the opening cello theme, with its vaguely folk-song quality, on the Russian tune of the finale. What he picked up for that purpose from the finale theme was mainly its beginning: the first four notes of the Russian tune, C–D–E–F, became the opening notes of his first-movement theme. The first two notes, the falling step D–C, linger throughout the quartet as a primal motif.

Most of the first movement will be involved with the opening theme, mainly its rising-fourth figure and its 1234 1 rhythm motif. The second theme extends the rising fourth scale line to an octave in another flowing theme, the cello again waxing melodic. After a gentle closing theme starting over a rustic drone, connoisseurs would hear the expected repeat of the exposition, returning to the opening cello melody. But it’s a feint; there will be no conventional repeat. From that point the development section spins through a winding course involving some dozen keys, coming to rest for a moment on a bit of double fugue.

The recapitulation is as singular as the false repeat of the exposition. It arrives back in F major not with the cello theme but with the first subtheme, then wanders off harmonically. At length, a grand C major scale brings in the recapitulation proper, but overlaps the return of the cello theme. All this deliberately blurs the moment of recapitulation; Beethoven wanted the form of the movement fluid, suppressing the formal landmarks to make a more continuous effect. In the coda the main theme returns in glory, pealed out in high violin over droning fifths in the bass, finding a stable harmonic foundation at last.

All the movements are in sonata form. The following Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando (vivacious and always playful) was for its time the
most scandalous movement of all, its personality and leading idea so eccentric that many never grasped how playful it is. (Beethoven never wrote another movement like it.) It occupies the place of a scherzo but has little to do with conventional scherzo style or form. It starts, like the first movement, with the cello alone, this time introducing a bouncing rhythm on a single B-flat, followed by a little dancing figure in the violin. Those two items will be nearly the entire subjects of a long movement, taken through a variegated course of keys and moods.

Nothing prepares listeners for the depth of the F minor Adagio molto e mesto third movement, mesto meaning “mournful.” It begins in medias res, with a twisting, anguished aria. The second theme is a sorrowfully arching melody that begins in a spidery texture of violin and cello. In the development comes a poignant, whispering arioso, like a tentative answer to pathos, a wounded consolation.

The last movement’s Russian folk tune begins an outing jaunty and ironic, verging on monothematic, and like the first and second movements beginning with cello alone. The main concern of the short development section is a sustained march toward an expansive treatment of the chattering second theme. The

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**RECEPTION OF THE RAZUMOVSKY QUARTETS**

Perhaps no work of Beethoven’s met a more discouraging reception from musicians, than these now famous Quartets. One friendly contemporary voice alone is heard—that of the “Allg. Mus. Zeit.” [Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung—General Music Newspaper of Leipzig]

Czerny told Jahn, that “when Schuppanzigh first played the Razumovsky Quartet in F, they laughed and were convinced that Beethoven was playing a joke and that it was not the quartet which had been promised.” And when Gyrowetz bought these Quartets he said: “Pity to waste the money!” The Allegretto vivace of the first of these quartets was long a rock of offence. “When at the beginning of the year 1812,” says Lenz, “the movement was to be played for the first time in the musical circle of Field Marshal Count Soltikoff in Moscow, Bernhard Romberg trampled under foot as a contemptible mystification the bass part which he was to play. The Quartet was laid aside. When, a few years later, it was played at the house of Privy Councillor Lwoff, father of the famous violinist, in St. Petersburg, the company broke out in laughter when the bass played his solo on one note.—The Quartet was again laid aside.”

Felix Radicati… went to the pianoforte, took up the quartets and seeing what they were, exclaimed (in substance): “Have you got these here! Ha! Beethoven, as the world says, and as I believe, is music-mad;—for these are not music. He submitted them to me in manuscript and, at his request, I fingered them for him. I said to him, that he surely did not consider these works to be music?—to which he replied, “Oh, they are not for you, but for a later age!””

From The Life of Beethoven (1866–79) by Alexander Wheelock Thayer
The Op. 59s are the quartets of great stories, they are like operas for a string quartet.

—Danish String Quartet

recapitulation begins in the wrong key, the Russian theme having to start with its first notes harmonized in B-flat until the music finds its way to F major. A racing and raucous fortissimo final page is interrupted by a gently chromatic adagio that recalls the atmosphere of the slow movement; then high spirits bubble up again. So ends a quartet fresh and fascinating, one that would have a galvanizing effect on the future development of the medium.

No. 2 of the Razumovsky set is a contrasting work in E minor. What surprises in this generally surprising opus is the intensity of the contrast. Where No. 1 is expansive and extroverted, the beginning of the E minor paints a character inward and unpredictable: two slashing chords by way of introduction, then keening wisps of melody falling into silences to start a compact exposition. On the second line a passionate theme breaks out only to go up in smoke, starts again only to be erased by a fortissimo outburst. The feeling of the minor mode here is not tragic but mysterious, with startling harmonic jumps. The opening whispered E minor figure moves, after a rest, to the same figure a half step higher, on F major. So we start with a jump from E minor to F with only silence as transition. That half-step harmonic motion will mark the whole quartet.

So will silences. Beethoven was as much a master of the expressive pause as of expressive notes. The rests here are fraught and questioning. And the overall progress of the quartet is not a clear dramatic narrative but something more intangible, abstract, even esoteric. The G major second theme is contrasting, gracious, sustained, the exposition’s closing theme a burst of ebullience. After a brief development, the music reaches the home key of E minor several bars before the recapitulation proper, so the development flows unbroken into the recapitulation. In the coda, the attempts at a sustained theme heard on the first page flower into a passionate stretch of melody that rises to a fortissimo peak and sinks back to stillness.

Carl Czerny recalled Beethoven saying that the E major second movement came to him “when contemplating the starry sky and thinking about the music of the spheres”—for Beethoven an evocation of the divine. It is a sonata-form movement of tender, long-breathed melodies in a poignant E major. The future would see this stretching for the ethereal and sublime as a prophecy of his late music. The theme of the droll and quirky scherzo smacks the second beat, giving the music an off-kilter tread. There are recollections of ideas from the quartet’s opening, and the second period makes the quartet’s trademark jump from E minor to F major. A droll and fugal trio gives another Russian tune a whirl.

In tonal terms, call the sonata-rondo finale ironically perverse: the rondo theme is in the wrong key, C major. It is a romping and raucous march with some sort of exotic overtone—Turkish, or Gypsyish. Against that C major the proper key, E minor, struggles to assert itself. In the developmental middle section a fugue pops up, its quick entries and mock-learned inversions of the theme reinforcing the comic mood. The overall tonal point is going to be, in the
coda, a grand resolution, belatedly, to E minor. Yet at the beginning of the coda, the rondo theme turns up yet again in its C major effrontery until the theme settles on the right key in a frenetic E minor peroration. In a way, the games with keys in the finale amount to comedy for connoisseurs, who recognize an unusual tonal leap when they hear one, and who know that a rondo theme is supposed to end up in the home key.

The introduction of the last of the Op. 59 quartets, No. 3 in C major, seems to announce the strangest, most charismatic piece of the set: wandering harmonies suggesting no key at all. Yet that introduces an Allegro vivace that could serve as a definition of vivace, “lively,” and of C major in its most ebullient mood. Connoisseurs of the time would immediately identify where this paradoxical juxtaposition came from: Mozart’s famous quartet nicknamed the “Dissonant,” because it has the same effect of a chromatic and gnarly introduction to a largely carefree C major movement. In the context of the Razumovsky set, it is as if with this high-spirited and ingratiating outing Beethoven offered a panacea for players and listeners boggled by the first two quartets.

After the introduction, the Allegro vivace starts with a sharp little pickup, creating much energy with a flick of the pen. Upbeat figures mark most of the themes, with steady variations on the idea. A long solo for the first violin presages a movement with concerto-like overtones, bravura solos handed around generously. The beginning is rambunctious with a loping rhythm; the second theme debuts in the conventional key, here G major. All this is to say that this is going to be a lively piece that is meanwhile the least searching, least eccentric member of Op. 59. There appears to be no quote of a Russian tune in the piece, but the second movement may have what Beethoven thought of as an evocation of a slow Russian song or dance. It is one of those sui generis pieces he pulled out of the air now and then, haunting and beautiful in its rocking rhythm, its quiet obsessiveness. The tone is muted and brooding rather than tragic, with a suddenly gay C major second theme.

In the third movement Beethoven looked back to the past in terms of his own present with a Menuetto grazioso. It is a minuet without lace, with only a distant echo of the old courtly tone, its mellow and unassuming gracefulness nearly as singular as the previous movement. For the Allegro molto finale he leaps into a madcap quasi-fugue, continual variations of its quirky and comical opening theme dashing through keys in company with a series of countersubjects. It is one of his less substantial but most effervescent finales, a movement skating headlong on its own constantly renewing energy.

Carl Czerny recalled Beethoven saying that the E major second movement came to him “when contemplating the starry sky and thinking about the music of the spheres.”

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.
FRIDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 14, 2020, AT 7:30  •  4,058TH CONCERT

Alice Tully Hall, Starr Theater, Adrienne Arsht Stage
Home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, violin
ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, viola
FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Quartet in E-flat major for Strings, Op. 74, “Harp” (1809)
• Poco adagio—Allegro
• Adagio ma non troppo
• Presto—Più presto quasi prestissimo
• Allegretto con variazioni
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in F minor for Strings, Op. 95, “Serioso” (1810–11)
• Allegro con brio
• Allegretto ma non troppo
• Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso
• Larghetto espressivo—Allegretto agitato
TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

• Maestoso—Allegro
• Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile
• Scherzando vivace—Presto
• Finale: Allegro
ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

When performing the Beethoven quartets in chronological order, the most marvelous opportunity arises in the program you are about to hear. Because we can experience, in the space of a single concert, the most far-reaching transformation which Beethoven underwent in his creative output. We begin towards the close of his “heroic” decade with two quartets, Op. 74 and 95, in which we find Beethoven on an experimental and undetermined path. Op. 74 looks back to Haydn and Mozart while still wearing the clothes of the composer’s “heroic” period. Op. 95, especially in its drastically compressed first movement, is almost an “anti-Razumovsky” quartet that aspires to cross the finish line in record time. And after intermission, when the magisterial opening chords of Op. 127 resound in the hall, we will feel ourselves standing in front of the Parthenon of music, at dawn of a new civilization for the art. The compositional chasm in Beethoven’s work between 1810 and 1825 is no more viscerally experienced than through the juxtaposition of works on this program. Along with the epiphany that brought on his middle period, this Beethoven transformation is one of the most consequential in the history of music. As a footnote we would like to add that the sublime variations which serve as this work’s slow movement were among the first pieces we heard performed by the Danish String Quartet, and their deep affinity for this music continues to inspire us and listeners worldwide.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

When talking about Beethoven, any musicologist will be quick to mention his three periods: the early, middle, and late. Ask the same musicologist to actually explain what Late Period Beethoven means and you will get an answer that resembles a theoretical physicist trying to define time. Just nod and smile politely, because it will probably not make a lot of sense. Tonight we will enter this mythical place of Late Period Beethoven. It happens in Op. 127. This quartet has a nice first movement. Good Beethoven stuff, as we all have come to expect at this point in the cycle, but nothing out of the ordinary. Then the second movement commences, and this is where we will leave into the unknown. On paper it is just a set of variations. Some of the variations are beautiful, some are very slow, some are dancing, the cello and the first violin often have nice tunes. But there is more to this music than the sum of all these parts. The characters are complex, often ambiguous. The structure is clear, yet undefined and open ended.

—Danish String Quartet
In 1809, a year in which Beethoven declared he produced only “a fragment here and there,” appeared the warm and ingratiating String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 74, eventually dubbed “Harp” for its striking pizzicatos. In his art Beethoven was in an in-between place. In a mammoth concert the year before he had premiered the climactic works of his Middle Period, the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and Fourth Piano Concerto. By 1809 it appears that he had come to feel the train of thought that had sustained his work in the six years since the Eroica Symphony were played out, and he did not know where he wanted to go next. He would not be sure of that for years to come. So he marked time with a string of works brilliant but in no particular direction. The first two works on this program are among them.

The first movement of the “Harp” is compact and without formal or, for that matter, emotional ambiguities. It begins with a gentle, flowing introduction, harmonically and metrically wandering but untroubled. Then a forthright Allegro breaks out with an 18th-century atmosphere, until the transition to the second theme injects some pizzicatos rare for the time in being in the foreground of the music rather than an accompaniment. Beethoven kept this movement gracious, elegant, beautiful, as unassuming as everything else in the piece. It is that quality that makes the “Harp” fresh in his work in general and his quartets in particular, especially compared to the aggressively radical Razumovskys.

All the same, he remained determined to give every work not only distinctive material but also a distinctive sonority. The pizzicatos are a way to do that simply and directly, and they were unusual enough to give a name to the quartet. In the first movement after a cheery and only modestly eventful development and fairly literal recapitulation (though the pizzicatos are extended), there comes a surprise in the form of an enormous coda that starts with frenetic and exciting cross-string fiddling from the first violin while the main theme surges beneath; then comes a section of accelerating pizzicatos. So as usual with Beethoven, the pizzicatos are not just a color or a passing fancy, but a motif to be developed and paid off. In his work he was searching, so he would not have known yet that one of the places he was headed toward in his late music was a poignant and broad songfulness like the Adagio ma...
non troppo second movement. Its main point is to present a long, lovely melody and two ornamented versions of it, spaced by two equally lyrical and barely contrasting sections. The contrast comes with the scherzo, marked Presto, a boisterous C minor excursion. Its exhilarating rhythmic thrust comes from a nimble alternation of three-beat (2+2+2) and two-beat (3+3) within the bar. The scherzo section alternates with a manically contrapuntal C major trio, marked Più presto quasi prestissimo, that comes back twice. The movement finishes with a preparatory chord that instead of ending the scherzo ushers in the finale. That this is a work more conciliatory than provocative finds its denouement in Beethoven’s only variation finale in a quartet. Its theme is a small bouncy Allegretto of unpretentious charm; the variations ornament the theme in six simple and graceful sections. The end becomes suddenly playful, then ebullient, finally fortissimo, only to pull back to a quiet and modest farewell.

All this is to say that the “Harp” Quartet is no lapel grabber, that for all its freshness it smacks of nothing “revolutionary.” This and the other pieces of 1809–10 were intended not to make strides but to bide time. Moreover, in the procession of his quartets, Beethoven may have wanted to give the public and musicians a rest after the strenuous workout of the Razumovskys. But the next quartet boils with fury.

Beethoven was not a Romantic artist setting out mainly to express himself, but it is still hard not to connect his emotional storms of 1810 with the String Quartet in F minor, completed that summer and eventually published as Op. 95. It is one of the singular works of his life, a challenge and an enigma. It is one of the handful of works to which he gave titles: Quartetto serioso.

For Beethoven F minor seems to have been a darkly expressive key, more raw, more nakedly tragic than often tumultuous C minor. It is the key of the Appassionata, of the dungeon scene in Fidelio. The Serioso seems to involve something on the order of a confrontation between love and rage. A simple description of its opening may be the best representation in words. A grinding furioso phrase answered by a violent silence. An eruption of stark octaves in jolting dotted rhythms. Another glowering silence. A wrenching harmonic jump from F minor to G-flat major in a tender phrase, quickly

### Quartet in F minor for Strings, Op. 95, “Serioso”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Composed in 1810–11.*

- First CMS performance on January 30, 1972, by the Guarneri String Quartet.
- Duration: 21 minutes

**SOMETHING TO KNOW:** *This was the only one of his string quartets that Beethoven titled and he intended it to be performed privately by “a small circle of connoisseurs.”* 

**SOMETHING TO LISTEN FOR:** *The insistent unison figure that opens the first movement sets the direct, concise tone for the whole quartet.*
shattered by the return of the *furioso* figure. After a first theme of 20 bars, which contain those three starkly contrasting ideas with only silence as transition, there is a short bridge to a second theme that sounds evanescent, breathless, unreal.

That moment of melting beauty is again invaded by the grinding figure and by an intrusion of uprushing fortissimo scales in inexplicable keys. In this movement there is more confrontation than transition, abrupt jumps from key to key, the sonata form so condensed as to be desiccated. There is no repeat of the exposition before the development, because in this movement the material is always volatile, all development.

At the same time, the music cannot escape from the opening *furioso* figure, which grinds through most of the 22 bars of a truncated development. The movement’s coda rises to a scream and falls to exhaustion. The second movement is a startling jump from F minor to D major, its beginning an enigmatic lone cello stride. The main theme is of a profound but fragile beauty. In its middle comes a strange fugue whose falling chromatic subject feels like an endless descent into sorrow.

There is no slow movement, nor a scherzo or minuet. In meter and tempo the third movement stands in place of a scherzo. So there can be no mistake about its import, it is marked *Allegro*

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**PRINCE RAZUMOVSKY’S QUARTET**

Razumovsky lived in his new palace on the Donau Canal, into which he had very recently removed from the Wallzeil and in which he had put his domestic establishment on a footing of great splendor. It suited his taste to have the first string quartet of Europe in his service... These were the years (1808–15) when, says [conductor and composer Ignaz von] Seyfried, “as is known Beethoven was, as it were, cock of the walk in the princely establishment; everything that he composed was rehearsed hot from the griddle and performed to the nicety of a hair, according to his ideas, just as he wanted it and not otherwise, with affectionate interest, obedience and devotion such as could spring only from such ardent admirers of his lofty genius, and with a penetration into the most secret intentions of the composer and the most perfect comprehension of his intellectual tendencies; so that these quartet players achieved that universal celebrity concerning which there was but one voice in the art-world.”

From *The Life of Beethoven* (1866–79) by Alexander Wheelock Thayer

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Violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, leader of Razumovsky’s quartet, by Josef Danhauser
assai vivace ma serioso, very lively but seriously. The movement has an aggressive drive, with relentless dotted rhythms and blunt silences. In contrast, the two trios are lyrical and soaring, recalling in their tone and keys (G-flat and D-flat) the tender moments of the first movement. A softly poignant phrase introduces an Allegro agitato finale that is nearly as tight and taut as the first movement. Its main theme begins curt, desiccated, half made of rests, until it reaches a surging, quietly agitated song. The penultimate page dies into silence, stasis, whispers. Then as perhaps the strangest stroke of all comes a coda that seems intended to wipe away all sadness. It is a burst of F major ebullience like the end of a comic opera, yet still short and curt, ending with an uprushing scale that recalls the peculiar ones in the first movement. If the coda is a resolution to hope, it is an oddly choked-off one—but hope all the same.

In 1810 Beethoven had experienced a devastating marriage rejection. Whether the fury and the tenuous moments of hope in the Serioso represent his state of mind that year is an open question. In any case he knew that this quartet was going to be a puzzle for listeners, perhaps enough so to harm his career. He did not publish it for six years, and in 1816 made an extraordinary declaration: “The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.” In any case, if in fact the Serioso is a cry from the soul that seemed to him too intimate to be made public, it is a tightly disciplined cry, a systematic experiment with the musical norms and forms he inherited. In that respect it amounts to something he could not have understood yet: a prophecy of music he was going to be writing a decade later.

Quartet in E-flat major for Strings, Op. 127

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Composed in 1824-25.

 › Duration: 37 minutes

+SOMETHING TO KNOW: This was Beethoven’s first quartet after a nearly 15-year creative hiatus. It was the first of three commissioned by Russian Prince Nikolai Galitzin.
+SOMETHING TO LISTEN FOR: The last movement ends with an otherworldly coda that announces itself with two mysterious trills.

In 1825, as the first of a commission for three quartets from Russian Prince Nikolai Galitzin, Beethoven finished the E-flat major, Op. 127. It is part of his quest in the late music for fresh ways of putting pieces together and, in keeping, new shades of feeling. Among other developments as he made his way through these works, he veered further from the norms of logic and continuity he had learned from the Viennese Classical tradition, delved further into effects of juxtaposition and discontinuity. Here is a new intensification of his art, reaching toward conceptions that were to galvanize composers into the next century.

Op. 127 is a study in lyricism expressed in the most delicate and
amiable passages—but they are new kinds of delicacy and amiability, with little trace of the 18th century. It begins with six bars of robust, bouncing chords in rich double-stops that in the first measures fool the ear about the meter—we hear a downbeat in the middle of the actual first beat. Before the first theme proper, those six introductory bars embody another of Beethoven’s games of these years with familiar formal functions: is this opening a theme or a micro-introduction? In practice it is more or less the latter, but it turns up a couple of times further in the movement, so it might better be called some sort of motto passage. The first theme appears, warm and flowing, in a violin line, handed off to viola, of fine lyrical charm. The rich contrapuntal web of these bars is going to return in various guises and permutations some two dozen times.

In the late music Beethoven is still thinking in terms of sonata form and the other traditional outlines, but the landmarks of the forms are receding into more of a sense of fantasia and improvisation. In a compact exposition, the G minor second theme flows lyrically like the first, and soon makes its way back to the first-theme idea. After a brief closing section we find ourselves returned to the opening “introduction,” as if the exposition has made the usual repeat back to the beginning. But the introductory idea is now in G major, and it ushers in the development without the usual repeat of the exposition. The development slips almost imperceptibly back into a transformed recapitulation, as if the recap were a continuation of the development. The coda, almost as long as the other sections, is pensive, to prepare the slow movement, which will be nearly as long as the other three combined. That movement begins with a long, slow-arching theme as subject for five gently beautiful variations.

Here Beethoven’s intensified focus on part writing comes to the fore: unlike anything before, these verge on texture variations, some of those textures made of distinct superimposed figures in the instruments.

The third movement is another of Beethoven’s sui generis outings. Marked *Scherzando vivace*, lively and playful, it is therefore a scherzo, and in scherzo–trio–scherzo form. Otherwise it sounds nothing like a scherzo, or a minuet either, though it is in 3/4 and in minuet rather than faster scherzo tempo. All of it is based on a bouncing and ironic tune that goes in and out of fugue, like a parody of a fugue extended to the point of seeming endless. The trio comes on in breathless triple one-beat, like a manic scherzo.

In the finale, after another short, sort-of introduction (which characterizes the beginning of all the movements), the first theme of the sonata form is again tenderly lyrical, like most of the quartet, and manifestly derived from the first theme of the first movement. Here lines in long, flowing phrases alternate with dancing figures in delicate staccato. As in the first movement, a compact exposition slips without repeat into a compact development that continues unbroken into a highly varied developmental recapitulation, and finally into a long coda. There is something magical about this coda, which transforms the main theme into passages that recall the liquid last variation of the slow movement. The quartet ends with the kind of heart-filling warmth that has marked it from the beginning.

*Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.*
Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 16, 2020, AT 5:00  4,060TH CONCERT

Alice Tully Hall, Starr Theater, Adrienne Arsht Stage
Home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, violin
ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, viola
FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Quartet in A minor for Strings, Op. 132 (1825)
› Assai sostenuto—Allegro
› Allegro ma non tanto
› Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart: Molto adagio—Neue Kraftfühlend: Andante
› Alla marcia, assai vivace
› Allegro appassionato

TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in B-flat major for Strings, Op. 130 (1825)
› Adagio, ma non troppo—Allegro
› Presto
› Andante con moto, ma non troppo
› Alla danza tedesca: Allegro assai
› Cavatina: Adagio molto espressivo
› Grosse Fuge, Op. 133
   Overtura: Allegro—Meno mosso e moderato—Allegro—Fuga: Allegro—Meno mosso e moderato—Allegromolto e con brio—Allegro

ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

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The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Having set foot in the rarefied world of late Beethoven with Op. 127 in this cycle’s previous concert, we are now fully immersed in the mind of someone who had entered a creative world all his own. No music like what you are about to hear was ever composed before; nor has it been created since. Crafted with the utmost technical skill and sense of design, the next three works on our cycle, including Op. 131 on the next program, share mysteriously powerful motivic ideas that connect them in spirit. Indeed, the first four notes you will hear on this concert will live either in the foreground or background from this concert through program six of the cycle. Op. 132, which opens this concert in a very different mood from the robust introduction to Op. 127, is a journey through sickness and recovery, and while universal in relevance, is closely connected to Beethoven’s own health crises at this point in his life. Its central movement, the famous Heiliger Dankgesang, is in every way one of music’s most innovative creations. Alternating between prayer sections and “feeling new strength” episodes, it conveys the miracle of renewed health with the deepest, most transparent profundity. After intermission, we enter another great palace of Beethoven’s unique universe. Op. 130, a quartet now expanded to six movements (Op. 132 had increased to five) functions somewhat like a Baroque suite: a diverse and entertaining collection of pieces that draw on every kind of music, from Baroque style (first movement) to folk dance (movement four, Alla danza tedesca). Beginning with the fifth movement, the extraordinarily emotional Cavatina, the quartet takes another turn. As a foil to its brief and simple message, the following 15-minute Grosse Fuge puts this quartet truly in a class of its own. The great fugue, which often stands alone on concert programs (but is much better experienced, in our opinion, in the context of the full quartet) is one of the most cataclysmic pieces ever written, revered by composers of all subsequent ages. Its violence, passion, craft, and daring all combine to deliver an experience of primal beauty unlike any other. By the end, we have triumphed along with Beethoven. For us be able to ride with him, in his chariot of victory, is one of the greatest gifts he left us.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

This is the fifth concert in the Beethoven cycle, and we are almost at the end of the road. But what an end! The music that we will dig into tonight is way up there in the Western cultural canon. Beethoven’s quartets Op. 132 and Op. 130/133 can easily match any Starry Night or Sistine Chapel.

But we have also reached a point where the narrative of an epic Beethoven cycle starts to crash with the actual music we will perform. All this talk
about canons, Sistine Chapels and cycles obscures the fact that tonight’s music mostly is intimate, private, and flawed. Yes, Op. 132 and Op. 130/133 are larger than life, but not because of their long duration or their ‘big’ moments. People often compare J. S. Bach’s music with cathedrals: Every note is perfectly placed, all the details mount up to divine structures. Beethoven’s Opp. 132 and 130/133 are different. They are human, not structures. They are flawed and unbalanced, deep and charming, shallow and annoying. They are indeed perfect, but perfect in the same way any tiny human being is more perfect than a divinely constructed pile of rocks.

—Danish String Quartet

A mark of Beethoven’s late music is the union of mystery and surprise with an inner logic that sinks traditional structure beneath a fantasy-like surface. The quiet opening of the A minor String Quartet, Op. 132, presents us with an effect of a gnomic puzzle turning around on itself. The four-note motto circling in all four parts—a half-step up, a leap up, a half-step down—is the fundamental motif of the quartet. (This is another of the three quartets commissioned by Russian Prince Galitzin, and all three involve that motif.) The phrase also implies most of the important keys of the piece. That opening, in other words, virtually contains the work in embryo.

The tone of the Op. 132 first movement is peculiarly poignant; call it poised between yearning and hope. A minor was an unusual key for Beethoven, who believed that each key had an innate character. This work defines A minor not as a tragic tonality but rather as a key of passion, irony, and mystery. After the opening bars turning around the motto, there is a sudden skittering Allegro that as suddenly dissolves. Fragments of a breathless, yearning theme burst out, alternating with driving dotted descents. That phrase, constantly shifting among the instruments, is less a theme than a theme about a theme, or a gesture toward a theme that

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Beethoven makes the most physical of human experiences, illness and recovery, into a sublime evocation of spiritual peace and thankfulness, then overflowing joy.

remains in potential. Yearning for the unrealizable: this is Romantic territory. In its incompleteness the yearning phrase is nonetheless the main theme of the movement, with new continuations in endless development. The rest of the relevant material is the skittering Allegro idea, the driving dotted figures, and a sweetly aching second theme in F major. There are no transitions, only sudden juxtapositions, like a character who is prey to manic emotions. These leaps among contrasting ideas, from quiet and austere to loud and passionate, foreshadow events all the way to the end of the quartet.

We are nominally in sonata form, though there is no repeat of the exposition, and the recapitulation apparently starts in the wrong key (E minor); a page later the music slips back into the home key A minor, but only briefly. To say what he needs to say Beethoven now has to bend the old forms still more, to more radical ends. In the quartet he writes more than the usual four movements; he suppresses and rearranges familiar formal and tonal landmarks for a through-composed effect; he makes the first-movement recapitulation nearly as developmental as the development section. All these are characteristic of the late music. So is a sort of minimalism, like the second-movement scherzo, an ineffably zany interlude. It begins with rising figures based on the first movement’s motto; over that phrase he places a swirling little waltz tune. This contrapuntal pair simply refuses to leave, dancing on chirpily through changes of key and texture. The middle-section trio is another quick shift of gears, its theme an ethereal musette. In the late music Beethoven will be both more complex and more simple than before. He will push every envelope.

In the third movement the composer steps from behind the curtain and reveals what this movement’s bifurcating directions are about. It is labeled on the score Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart, “Holy song of thanks to God from a convalescent, in Lydian mode.” The joyful dance that twice interrupts the hymn is headed Neue Kraft fühlen, “Feeling new strength.” The convalescent is Beethoven himself, recovered from a dangerous illness. Here too is territory prophetic of Romanticism: the artist as subject of his art. In this movement Beethoven makes the most physical of human experiences, illness and recovery, into a sublime evocation of spiritual peace and thankfulness, then overflowing joy. It is nominally double variations, laid out ABABA, but the hymn is varied more, each time more melismatic, songful, ethereally ecstatic.

Then comes a short, jaunty Alla Marcia, assai vivace that jolts us out of the song of thanksgiving. After what seems like only the first part of a march comes another startling and ironic turn: the march doesn’t finish but rather dissolves, and the first violin gives out an impassioned quasi-recitative that serves as transition to an Allegro appassionato finale. This is a surging, sighing three-beat rondo, relatively straightforward in layout, merely unforgettably beautiful. The sustained singing line that eluded
the first movement flows here in a long, steadily intensifying melody. In the coda it climaxes in a breathless and breathtaking presto, the theme scored in a doubling of high cello and violin, the middle voices in a chattering accompaniment, and no bass line at all: the climax seems to ascend into the air. The last pages are in a joyous A major.

Whether or not the three Galitzin Quartets were designed with the possibility of being presented on a single program, there is no question that, for all their individuality, they took shape as some kind of unit—sharing material, forming a steady intensification of the principle of contrast until, with the String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130, contrast reached the verge of fracturing the music.

The most obvious departure from convention in Op. 130 is its six movements, each a singular personality. Within each movement are further and more devious departures. The first page amounts to another ambiguous, not-quite introduction. It presents three disjunct ideas: an adagio chromatic moan that grows into chords that close in on F major; a pensive fugato on a figure that rises chromatically and then falls in a chain of thirds; then a sudden allegro burst of 16ths, also based on a falling chain of thirds, over which is laid a little fanfare. These are not just radically contrasting pieces of material; they are three distinct feelings, call them solemn, poignant, ebullient. By Beethovenian logic, that beginning will set up themes, motifs, emotions, trains of thought that will unfold to the end of the piece. But in the B-flat Quartet, the main thing that is going to apply is dissociation. It is as if Beethoven asked himself, having spent my life pushing the envelope of contrast in pieces, how far can I push the contrast before the music falls apart?

The three mutually exclusive ideas laid out on the first page are not themes as such; they are snippets that foreshadow themes to come. The non-introduction is concluded by a return to the opening adagio. Then the allegro 16ths break out again, becoming the first theme proper. Again we are in a warped sonata form, the introduction material turning up in various guises. There are more than a dozen changes of mood and tempo in the first movement. But here the disruptions are, on the whole,
in a spirit of irony and gaiety. The short, anti-dramatic development sounds like a haunting interlude on a hurdy-gurdy, obsessive harmonies pulsing under the introduction’s fanfare motif and a soaring legato line that comes and goes. The coda returns to the solemn opening idea of the movement, then the rocketing theme and the fanfare figure. So at the end the principal ideas are joined, but hardly with a sense of resolution. The end falls into fragments, more dissociated even than the beginning.

The odd-numbered movements of the quartet are expansive, the second and fourth compact, the second-movement scherzo compact to the point of deliberate absurdity: two repeated phrases obsessing on a snide little motif, a helter-skelter trio, great sighs from the first violin, and a repeat of the scherzo, all adding up to about two hilarious minutes. We expect a slow movement to follow and we do get an Andante, but subtitled poco scherzoso, “a little jokingly.” It begins with two bars of somber recollection of the first movement’s chromatic beginning, but that is a misdirection. The ensuing movement is bustling and genial, involving some marvelously fresh sounds. It is laid out in sonata form, now as regular and uniform in material as the first movement is the opposite. In a section of the development marked cantabile, “singing,” each of the four instruments has its own figure, the four fitting together like a mosaic of variegated colors.

As fourth movement comes the lyrical three-beat lilt of an Alla danza tedesca, “like a German dance.” It is an artless movement, laid out in a scherzo-like

THE BEETHOVEN QUARTET CYCLE IN HISTORY

CMS presents its sixth Beethoven quartet cycle this season and this cycle is now performed many times each season all over the world. But Beethoven cycles didn’t start immediately after the composer’s death. It was years before the quartet cycle began to be performed regularly (and decades more before the Grosse Fuge was included). Probably the biggest reason for the delay was because Beethoven’s late quartets took a long time to gain widespread acceptance.

The first Beethoven quartet cycle took place in 1845 in London, a city the composer never visited. It was initiated by an enthusiastic amateur musician and influential tastemaker Thomas Massa Alsager. Though not a professional musician, Alsager started as music critic for the Times, moved to the financial pages, and eventually bought himself into part ownership of the paper. Alsager worked to promote Beethoven’s late music at a time when it wasn’t yet universally admired or understood. A review of his cycle explained, “[Alsager’s] efforts have convinced amateurs that the Posthumous Quartets are not the ravings of a shattered intellect, but the inspirations of a mighty genius in the vigor of its prime.”

The cycle was repeated every year until 1851 with a break in 1849, so six times total. It’s unclear why it stopped, but over those six years it started a tradition that flourishes today.
form with a trio in the middle. Again on display is the unprecedentedly varied scoring of all the Galitzins. The ingenuous principal theme begins in violin alone for four bars, the next phrase done by the violins in octaves; the consequent phrase again moves from first violin to violins in octaves, then the whole tune returns in octaves. The movement is an array of subtly mixed colors.

After four movements, call them comic, ironic, dancing, and gently wistful, comes the Cavatina, one of the most elegiac and tragic of all movements by Beethoven or anyone else. It is a song of endless heartbreak. Beethoven said he had never been so moved in composing a movement; even the thought of it brought him to tears. It has another of the wide-arching melodies of the late slow movements. The manifestly sobbing last section is marked Beklemmt, “anguished.”

From comedy to anguish, to what? A fugal finale as Beethoven was now given to, but one like no other: what he called the Grosse Fuge, “Great Fugue.” After the premiere one critic called it “incomprehensible, like Chinese.” This is music eternally avant-garde, some sort of fugue to end all fugues. It is founded on a single motif, which is the same as the opening motto of the A minor Quartet. In the course of the movement that theme will be transformed in character while being subjected to nearly every traditional technical and thematic device: augmentation of the theme, diminution, stretto, and so on.

The Grosse Fuge begins with what Beethoven called the Overtura, the main theme declared starkly in four octaves, fortissimo. We hear a parade of snippets of music to come. Then the first fugue explodes with a fortissimo that rages on for four manic minutes. That fugue stops almost as if hitting a wall, then begins a slower, pianissimo second fugue picking up the idea from the Overtura, weaving flowing figures around the theme. The third section begins as an as-if fugue whose subject is another transformation of the main theme. Lyrical at first, the rhythm like a gigue or a scherzo, it segues into a new fugue that builds to the ferocity of the first one. After a gigantic, tortured climax, the slower version of the fugue returns briefly, likewise another bit of earlier music, no longer treated fugally but instead gentled into lyrical gaiety. It is as if the idea of fugue itself has disintegrated en route.

Just before the coda everything dissolves into fragments: a recall of the opening fortissimo fugue, then a couple of bars of the slower second fugue. The music seems to ask, Which will it be, fury or peace? The coda returns to the stern proclamation of the Overtura, as if looking back across a journey that began on a distant peak. Then the fury drains out of the music, leaving delicate trills and a gentle recall of the theme that rises in a long crescendo from pianissimo to a fortissimo conclusion.

Beethoven’s publisher persuaded him to write a more merciful replacement for the finale, and Beethoven complied, but the Grosse Fuge is the true ending. What does it mean to the whole of the Quartet in B-flat major, this enigma that concludes the most enigmatic work of his life? Many guesses would be proffered over the next two centuries. The more relevant ones would call the essence of the B-flat major Quartet irony, disjunction, paradox. The fugue brings the climax of those qualities. In this quartet Beethoven the supreme master of form and unity used all his craft to conjure a vision of disunity unto chaos, comic in tone some of the time, in the end more provoking than joking, but with its own logic, however elusive. And it ends in peace.

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.
TUESDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 18, 2020, AT 7:30 • 4,062ND CONCERT

Alice Tully Hall, Starr Theater, Adrienne Arsht Stage
Home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

DANISH STRING QUARTET
FREDERIK ØLAND, violin
RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, violin
ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, viola
FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN, cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Quartet in C-sharp minor for Strings, Op. 131 (1825–26)
› Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo—
› Allegro molto vivace—
› Allegro moderato—Adagio—
› Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile—
› Presto—
› Adagio quasi un poco andante—
› Allegro

ØLAND, TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

Quartet in F major for Strings, Op. 135 (1826)
› Allegretto
› Vivace
› Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo
› Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss: Grave, ma non troppo tratto—Allegro

TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, ØLAND, NØRGAARD, SCHØYEN SJÖLIN

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

We have reached the last chapter of Beethoven’s life and creative output. The two works you are about to hear virtually summarize everything of which Beethoven was made. To begin with, in Op. 131, we have Beethoven’s most audacious string quartet of the entire cycle: an unbroken string of seven movements, interconnected motivically like a giant novel which, at the end, comes full circle. During the journey, we encounter Beethoven in an astounding variety of moods, beginning with his late-period fascination with Baroque forms, as evidenced by the long, severe fugue which opens the work. Beethoven’s youthful spirit manifests itself in the next movement, and he puts his unparalleled skill at variation composition on display thereafter. The virtual inventor of the diabolical scherzo then gives us his longest and wildest one yet, followed by a lament which goes straight to the heart. And as a finale, as the opening fugal motif returns amid savage energy, we know that Beethoven has grasped fate by the throat and will ultimately triumph in a blazing C-sharp major. After this life-and-death struggle, we will experience what one might call Beethoven’s postscript to the entire cycle, his final completed work, Op. 135. Virtually every moment of this quartet can be heard from a perspective of reflection. Its wistful, philosophical first movement makes us ponder. The brief, lightning-fast scherzo reminds us of life’s craziest episodes. The slow movement may well be Beethoven’s most moving adagio of all. And the final chapter of the long story of this cycle asks the ambiguous question “Must it be” (written in the autograph at its outset) answered by the unequivocal “It must be!” all of which are readily sing-able along with the music during the course of the movement, right up to the end. Whether Beethoven was being deeply fatalistic or simply reflecting on the comedy of life, we will never know. But what is certain is that Beethoven, in the midst of his isolation and suffering, chose to express through his music the kind of eternal optimism which keeps our world turning and our spirits high.

—David Finckel and Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

How to end a great story? Wagner burned down everything in his Ring. Frodo returned to The Shire and smoked a pipe. No one seems to agree about how Beethoven actually ends his story (or if he even considered his quartets to constitute a story). First up tonight is his quartet Op. 131. It is legendary. Since its composition, it has been soaked in classical music lore, maybe too much for its own good: “Wow, did they really perform it to Schubert on his death-bed? Did Wagner really think it was the most melancholic music ever written? Did they really make a mediocre Hollywood Soap Opera based on this quartet?” Behind all the noise, Op. 131 is just a spectacular work of art from the first note to the last. Try to experience it with a pure mind.

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The last quartet of the cycle, Op. 135, is just as spectacular, but in a different way. Beethoven doesn’t go for the Götterdämmerung; he is more along the lines of Tolkien. Op. 135 feels like a return to simpler times. It is less epic and less pretentious than the four monster quartets that came before it. It leaves us with an unresolved feeling, despite the famous “it must be” words of the last movement. And that is maybe the beauty of it all. Great art and great stories should leave some things open and unresolved. In the second season of Twin Peaks, David Lynch was pressed by ABC network execs to reveal Laura Palmer’s murderer and it was an artistic disaster. Luckily Beethoven didn’t care too much about network execs or institutions: He left us with 16 quartets in which every little wonder and mystery is intact, hundreds of years later.

—Danish String Quartet

As a composer Beethoven said very little about his music, but the few things he did say speak volumes. Perhaps the most significant was this: “It is my habit always to keep the whole in view.” That he conceived of his works as a whole is never more deeply expressed than in the late string quartets in general and the C-sharp minor Quartet, Op. 131, in particular.

Op. 131 begins with a keening melody on the middle strings of the first violin—its most subdued register, and on the instruments C-sharp minor a dark-toned key with few open strings. A second violin enters with the theme; a fugue begins to take shape. As the entries work their way down to the cello the texture remains austere, moving in simple quarter and half notes. It has an archaic feel, like a Renaissance sacred work. In the late music Beethoven wanted to invest the old genre of fugue with more emotion than it had ever possessed. Here is the climax of that investment.

The piece did not come easily for Beethoven; there were more than six hundred pages of sketches. As it finally took shape, the quartet comprises seven

Quartet in C-sharp minor for Strings, Op. 131

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

› Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn.
› Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna.


› First CMS performance on March 5, 1987, by the Emerson String Quartet.
› Duration: 40 minutes

+SOMETHING TO KNOW: Beethoven’s formal experiments in the late quartets reach a climax with this seven movement work performed without pause.
+SOMETHING TO LISTEN FOR: The first movement starts with a brooding fugue, establishing from the outset that this quartet will be very different from traditional Classical form and style.

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numbered movements, each rising from the preceding one with little or no pause. The first movement of the C-sharp minor begins with a fugal exposition, but much of the rest is a contrapuntal and imitative development on the motifs of the theme, sonata-like, including a second-theme section in B major (not fugal) where the flowing motif is speeded into eighth notes. After some exquisitely poignant echoing duets and more development, the last section before the coda is a fugue using an augmentation of the theme, each note doubled in length. In this period Beethoven often writes enormous harmonic arcs, like page-long sentences: the first clear cadence to C-sharp minor does not arrive until the end of the movement; the first truly firm cadence to that key is in the finale.

Just before the final bars, the first violin reaches up achingly to D, the gesture enfolding both poignance and logic: it makes a tonal transition to the second movement’s nimble and dashing gigue in D major. Deep darkness to light: part of the effect of the second movement’s sudden brightening is the effect of D major in the instruments, that key involving most of the open strings. Like all the movements, the second has a memorable leading theme, blithe and liquid. A big coda builds up to a stern, three-octave declaration that resurrects the serious side of the quartet. The sound remains open and simple; this quartet will not engage in the kinds of intricate textural experiments Beethoven carried on in the Galitzins.

The coda of the second movement slips suddenly from fortissimo to soft sighs and fragments. What comes next is marked “No. 3” as if it were a movement, but really it is a short preface to what follows. It is variations on a memorable and ingenuous tune that is presented in call-and-response between the violins.

In the late music Beethoven wanted to invest the old genre of fugue with more emotion than it had ever possessed.

Next is the scherzo, a Presto with a trio in the middle. Here is comedy in rumbustious staccato, the tone somewhere between folk-like and ingenuous, starting with the cello’s gruff opening gesture like a clearing of the throat. This movement is as tuneful as the others, especially the lyrical, musette-like theme of the twice-returning trio, which has a giddy refrain that is one of Beethoven’s most childlike moments.

Just as “movement” no. 3 was a preface for no. 4, no. 6 is a preface for no. 7, in the form of a somber, aria-like Adagio in G-sharp minor. Its key of G-sharp prepares the C-sharp minor finale—and its tone returns to the seriousness, though not the sorrow, of the first movement. In effect it poses a question: at the end of this journey that started in grief and has taken us through dance and grace and tenderness and laughter and nursery tunes, where do we end?

We end in a fierce march, the first movement in the quartet to have a fully decked-out sonata form. It is broadly integrative, pulling together ideas from the whole work. Here again is the D-natural whose interjection into the quartet’s opening fugue contributed to that movement’s poignancy. The main theme’s legato second section returns to the head motif of the first fugue, first inverted and then right-side up. A short but warmly lyrical second theme breaks
out in a bright, breathtaking E major, its rising line recalling the trio theme of the scherzo. The driving staccato of the march recalls the staccato part of the scherzo. The keys are the leading ones of the quartet: E and D major, F-sharp minor in the coda. The end barely makes it out of F-sharp minor to a quick, full-throated close on C-sharp major.

As an answer to the mournful first movement, the finale is driving and dynamic but not with the kind of triumph that ended the Third and Fifth Symphonies. In the C-sharp minor the transcendence is deeper. In the first movement the formality of the fugue makes it something on the order of a ceremony carried out within profound grief. Transcendence is adumbrated in the moments of hope that temper the first movement, the integral fabric that enfolds the whole quartet, the emotional journey that enfolds so much of life. As Beethoven’s hard-won labors transcended the anguish of his own life, the triumph of this quartet, its answer to suffering, is the supreme poise and integration of the whole work.

Beethoven did not expect the String Quartet in F major, Op. 135, to be his last completed piece, but he did intend it to be his last string quartet. As such it is a look back, retrospective and in tone essentially comic. Written in a time when his body was sliding toward his final collapse, the quartet is full of laughter and irony as Haydn expressed them, and in the middle lies a soulful song. Its laughter is not exactly carefree, rather a performance by an artist old and tired, a final smiling doff of the cap. Not long after, as Beethoven lay dying, nearly his last words were: “Applaud, friends, the comedy is over.”

The F major begins with a couple of questioning fillips, answered by pianissimo hiccups. The fillips condense toward a graceful theme, but it is interrupted by a mock-solemn incantation in octaves. What has been established is a tone wry and quirky, a texture lucid and open as in Mozart and Haydn—and the early Beethoven quartets.

The middle two movements are about as contrasting as contrast gets. The scherzo, placed second, is another of his short, minimal, verging on absurdist ones, the humor here perhaps the driest of all. It involves simple lines that seem to be devoted to three different downbeats. Occasionally an errant E-flat blurs in on the offbeat.
without explanation. The absurdity reaches its denouement in the trio, which begins racing crazily and reaches a boggling moment when, under a screeching folk tune in the violin, the other instruments blare a swirling manic figure in three octaves, unchanged, 50 times. The effect is outlandish, and intended to be. The slow movement that follows is a transcendentally songful theme and four gentle variations, all flowing together.

By the time he reached the finale, Beethoven was badly ill and weary of quartets. He confessed to his publisher, "Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement . . . And that is the reason why I have written the motto: The decision taken with difficulty—Must it be?—It must be, it must be!"

That joke was what came to him to solve his finale problem in the F major. It accounts for its mysterious preface, headed Der schwere gefaßte Entschluss, "The Hard-Won Resolution." Under it lies a grave musical question of G–E–Ab, noted as Muss es sein?, "Must It Be?" Then a laughing allegro phrase is noted, Es muss sein! Es muss sein! Neither of these phrases is to be played; together they are a preface and program for the finale. The solemn introductory music around the played Muss es sein? introduction is part of the joke: it is the rhetoric of tragedy applied to comedy. The allegro that follows is all swirling, dancing gaiety, the Es muss sein! figure its motto.

Whether or not Beethoven planned it this way, the retrospective, puckish, Haydnesque quality of the quartet rounded his career in the medium. With Op. 18 he had begun his journey with string quartets grounded in the 18th century. With Op. 59 he put the stamp of his maturity on the medium. In the late quartets he reached for the future, but ended his journey with a profoundly wise look back at the beginning.

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer who lives in western Massachusetts.
ABOUT THE ARTISTS

DANISH STRING QUARTET
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violin; Frederik Øland, violin; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello

“One of the best quartets before the public today” (The Washington Post), the Grammy-nominated Danish String Quartet astonishes audiences with its “nimble charisma, stylish repertoire, and the way their light and grainy shading can turn on a dime” (The Guardian). Beyond even its impeccable musicianship and sophisticated artistry, the quartet’s playing reflects an expressivity and joyful spontaneity that animates repertoire from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. The recipient of many awards and prestigious appointments, including the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet has been named BBC Radio 3’s New Generation Artists and is an alum of CMS’s Bowers Program.

In the 2019–20 season, the Danish String Quartet returns to North America in three sweeping tours that celebrate Beethoven’s 250th birthday. The quartet appears in Minneapolis, Vancouver, Portland, Seattle, Rohnert Park, Berkeley, Santa Barbara, Irvine, Montreal, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Boston, and Iowa City, and brought a concert series to La Jolla Music Society in November as part of a three-year residency there. In February 2020, the group returns to Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center to perform the entire Beethoven cycle, and in May, brings that program to St. Paul, Minnesota as the Schubert Club’s 2019-20 Featured Ensemble. European engagements include London’s Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, and multiple dates in Denmark, as well as tours of Germany, Brussels, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain.

Committed to reaching new audiences through special projects, in 2007 the quartet established the DSQ Festival, which takes place at Copenhagen’s Bygningskulturens Hus and features meticulously curated programs with distinguished guest artists. In 2016 the group inaugurated a new music festival, Series of Four, which finds its home at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall.

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The Danish String Quartet has received numerous citations and prizes, including First Prize in the Vagn Holmboe String Quartet Competition, the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition, and the 11th London International String Quartet Competition. In 2011, the quartet received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark. Last Leaf, the quartet’s album of traditional Scandinavian folk music recorded for ECM, was named one of the top classical albums of 2017 by NPR, Spotify, The New York Times, and others.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørenson and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played soccer and made music together. As teenagers, they began studying classical chamber music under Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjølin.
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