

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 14 November 2022
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin
Harumi Rhodes violin
Richard O'Neill viola
András Fejér cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No. 5 in A Op. 18 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto •
III. Andante cantabile • IV. Allegro*

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 95 'Serioso' (1810-1)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto ma non troppo •
III. Allegro assai vivace ma serioso – Più allegro •
IV. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato*

Interval

String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1824-5)

*I. Maestoso - Allegro •
II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile •
III. Scherzando vivace - Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro*



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In the **Beethoven** Centenary issue of *Music & Letters*, 102 years ago, the now-famous composer (and viola player) Rebecca Clarke wrote about 'The Beethoven Quartets as a player sees them'. Her first sentence picks up her theme in a way that might be discouraging to many of us:

It is almost impossible for those who have never played in a string quartet to realise to what an extent those who do [,] have the advantage over them ... The Beethoven quartets more than any others are pre-eminently for the player rather than for the listener.

Then she offers a ray of hope:

The player must himself illumine the hidden obscurities, and unless he well understands them he cannot hope to make others do so.

Here in a nutshell is the definition of all great string quartets – the power to communicate their own understanding.

The dedications of Beethoven's quartets suggest that he knew what Clarke meant. A profusion of Princes, yes, but *musical* princes – Prince Lobkowitz, a keen violinist, maintained a private orchestra on which Beethoven was able to try out the 'Eroica' symphony several times before its official première. Prince Galitzin was a cellist, whose father had been one of Mozart's patrons. And there were several businessmen, like Nikolaus Zmeskall, who played the cello, as well as lending Beethoven money. All were able to enter into the spirit of 'their' quartets, and perhaps even to play them. The quartets give us a more intimate insight into Beethoven's world than any other genre.

Beethoven, perhaps keenly aware of standing in the shadow of his teacher Haydn, the creator of the classic string quartet, did not publicly attempt quartet writing until after he had experimented successfully with string trios, which he published in 1796, 1797 and 1798. The six Op. 18 quartets followed in 1801, the three Razumovskys in 1808, with the singletons Op. 74 and Op. 95 composed around 1810. Beethoven spoke of writing more string quartets in 1822, and in November of that year Prince Nikolas Galitzin put his money where Beethoven's mouth was – that's to say, he commissioned the next set of three quartets. Beethoven promised to finish the first one by March 1823, but got sidetracked by the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis*, which he thought was so deeply influenced by Palestrina that it could more or less be sung by unaccompanied voices! (Here the hollow laughter of choirmasters.) Eventually the quartet Op. 127 in E flat was premièred in March 1825, Op. 132 in November, and the third of Galitzin's quartets, Op. 130, on 21 March 1826. (The opus numbers reflect the order of publication.)

The A major quartet is the most elegant of the Op. 18 set, but is much more than a backward glance at Mozart. Robert Simpson found it 'informed by an

amused restraint with a trace of irony in it – "So you think me crude?": as neat a way of summing up the 30-year-old Rhineland outsider as could be wished for.

Even the tempo directions of Op. 95 suggest that Beethoven is straining after particular expression. No-one was expecting a *serious* Allegro vivace or an *agitated* Allegretto. And indeed, is *Allegretto ma non troppo* slower or faster than *Allegretto agitato*? Slower, probably, judging by the context. That movement leads directly into the next, another indication of serious purpose, as are the accelerating tempo markings for the last two movements. Op. 127 goes much further in the matter of changing tempo indications. The slow movement, a set of variations, incorporates an andante con moto and an adagio, while the scherzo also includes allegro sections (in a different metre) and some prestos.

Beethoven's health, always poor, deteriorated noticeably from about 1815. He would take to bed with a cold for weeks on end. In 1822 he gave up hope that his hearing would ever come back, and was immediately visited by a new ailment, inflammation of the eyes. In 1825 he had to find a new doctor to treat a serious stomach problem, having fallen out with all his former medical advisers. Giving up alcohol got him well enough to visit the spa at Baden, whence he described his symptoms: 'Very weak, belching and so forth. I spit a good deal of blood, frequent nosebleeds. Stomach dreadfully weak.' Nonetheless, he was able to work on the three quartets commissioned by Galitzin. It's a testament to the transfiguring power of art that the symptoms he described so frankly should lie behind the slow movement of the quartet Op. 132, with its bulletin 'Feeling stronger' (*Neue Kraft fühlend*) written into the score.

Rebecca Clarke tells an interesting story about Op. 127:

The insight which can be gained by playing a work is well shown in a story told by Böhm, the quartet leader to whom the second performance was entrusted, the first having been an utter failure. The rehearsals were superintended by Beethoven himself, for though he was unable to hear a sound, he could detect to the smallest detail from the bowing of the musicians whether they were playing as he wished. Böhm says: 'At the close of the last movement there occurred a *meno vivace*, which seemed to me to weaken the effect. At the rehearsal, I advised that the original tempo be maintained. Beethoven, crouched in a corner, heard nothing, but watched with strained attention. After the last stroke of the bows he said, laconically "Let it remain so," went to the desks and crossed out the *meno vivace* in the four parts.'

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