

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 20 January 2025  
1.00pm

## Juilliard String Quartet

Areta Zhulla violin  
Ronald Copes violin  
Molly Carr viola  
Astrid Schween cello

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

## String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 (1825-6)

*I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro •  
II. Presto • III. Andante con moto ma non troppo •  
IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai •  
V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo •  
VI. Finale. Allegro*

## Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

## String Quartet No. 8 'Beethoven Study III'

Commissioned by the Juilliard String Quartet, the Juilliard School of Music and the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music, supported by Walter Swap together with the commissioners Green Music Center at Sonoma State University, Meany Center for the Performing Arts, Chamber Music Society In Napa Valley and the Royal Concertgebouw Amsterdam



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The Russian Prince Nikolai Galitzin was an amateur cellist and keen admirer of **Beethoven's** music. In 1822, he wrote to the composer from St. Petersburg, asking him for 'one, two or three new quartets', and – with somewhat reckless generosity – allowing him to set his own fee. Other commitments, including the Ninth Symphony, meant that it took Beethoven until 1825 to complete the first quartet for the Prince, but a further two quartets followed in the same year.

Now in his 50s, Beethoven was troubled by deafness, chronic illness, and a turbulent relationship with his nephew Karl, who had been placed under his guardianship. He had neglected quartet writing for 12 years before the Galitzin commission, but it would start an extraordinary run of late works for the form, leaving us some of the most profound and fascinating music he ever composed.

The Op. 130 quartet in B flat was the third and last that Beethoven composed for Galitzin. When it was premièred by the Schuppanzigh Quartet in Vienna in 1826, the audience encountered a work of strange proportions. It had six movements: the inner four were short, but it culminated in an immense 'Great Fugue', a 15-minute contrapuntal juggernaut that scarcely paused for breath. While some movements drew a positive response, the Great Fugue proved a frustrating challenge for players and listeners alike. One critic pronounced it 'incomprehensible, like Chinese'.

Subsequently, the music publisher Matthias Artaria and violinist Karl Holz encouraged Beethoven to compose a replacement finale. After some initial resistance, the composer was eventually won round to the idea by an agreement for Artaria to publish the Great Fugue separately, for an extra fee. Beethoven composed the new finale in the autumn of 1826, in what would be the last work he completed before his death in March 1827.

In its final form, Op. 130 is among the more extrovert of the late quartets, a work of bold contrasts and surprises. The first movement is notable for its switching of tempo. The tentative Adagio opening – a unison line that spreads into chords mid-phrase – soon erupts into an Allegro driven by fast cascading runs in the first violin. These two tempos tussle throughout the movement, sometimes for only a few bars each, while the cello turns the cascading figure into an elegant lead-in for the second subject.

After this questioning ambivalence, the very short Presto in B flat minor is like a high-speed chase. The movement is given a sinister edge by the furtive quietness of its main theme, and the manically obsessive rhythm of the central section. In the following Andante, this primal energy evaporates. Two bars of apparent despondency turn, with a wink, into cheerful music in D flat major. The closely woven textures and abundant ornamentation of this witty movement seem to hark back to the Rococo style.

The 'Alla danza tedesca' ('like a German dance') has a pastoral character, with its harmony and form both

simplified. This charming melody in G major – a natural and resonant key for string players – arrives without introduction, undergoes a freewheeling variation in the vein of the tavern fiddler, and is then whimsically taken apart. The emotional heart of Op.130, however, is undoubtedly the 'Cavatina' - or 'little song' - that follows. It was reported that Beethoven was moved to tears by this beautiful Adagio, with its close harmonies led by a sustained violin melody in the vocal range. In one brief but remarkable passage, the melodic line almost dissolves into quiet sobs – here Beethoven writes *beklemmt*, or 'oppressed' – before it recovers its composure.

A staccato octave pattern provides the motor for the Finale, with a theme that playfully side-steps from C minor to the home key. This movement could not be more different from the Great Fugue: the clear textures and overall sunny disposition build on the sociable character of the Andante and 'Alla danza tedesca', and bring Op. 130 to a remarkably untroubled close. It is rather poignant that while Beethoven's health was in terminal decline, such apparently carefree music should be the last that he completed.

Opinion remains divided on whether Op. 130 is best served in its original or final form. What's certain is that with the dolmen-like weight of the Great Fugue lifted, the work's centre of gravity shifts towards the Cavatina. In 1977, a recording of this sublime movement was included on the Golden Record carried by the Voyager space probes – a collection of human speech and music assembled for the edification of distant worlds. The Great Fugue may exemplify Beethoven striving for the Emyrean, but his 'little song' has since left our solar system altogether, and now spins in interstellar space.

The German composer and clarinettist **Jörg Widmann** considers the string quartet to be the core of his oeuvre. In 2019, having already completed a cycle of five quartets, he decided to embark on a new series of 'Beethoven Studies' devoted to exploring the art of Beethoven's quartet writing. His sixth quartet, 'Beethoven Study I' was composed that year, and a further four have followed.

Widmann's 'Beethoven Study III' of 2020 was commissioned by the Juilliard Quartet. Running to around 13 minutes, its three movements have a prevailing fast tempo. The first is an Allegro con brio of 'extreme brevity', while the second is a set of variations on the eight-bar opening of Beethoven's 'Alla danza tedesca' – a theme that, in Widmann's words, is 'teeming with exceptional rhythmic, melodic and harmonic features'. The final movement, however, is 'the central and most extended section' of the work, one which 'repeatedly becomes caught up, almost ad absurdum, in its own breathless playfulness'.

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