

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 23 November 2025
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 1 in F Op. 18 No. 1 (1798-1800)

I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro

String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 18 No. 3 (1798-1800)

I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Allegro • IV. Presto

Interval

String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132 (1825)

I. Assai sostenuto – Allegro • II. Allegro ma non tanto • III. Molto adagio – Andante • IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace – Più allegro • V. Allegro appassionato – Presto



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Beethoven's six **Opus 18 Quartets** were a statement of arrival. This was not his arrival in Vienna – he had left Bonn and set up home in the Austrian capital in 1792, and the Quartets were published in 1801. Nor did they mark his debut as a serious composer; he had already published his early Piano Trios, some Piano and Violin Sonatas, and a handful of Piano Sonatas including the 'Pathétique'.

The Quartets Op. 18 were nevertheless a bold entrance onto a prestigious stage. Just as Mozart had done when he was the same age, the 27-year-old Beethoven began work on a set of six string quartets in direct confrontation with Joseph Haydn. Haydn, Beethoven's one-time teacher in Vienna, had established the string quartet genre through publishing his own quartets in half-dozen batches. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven – the young pretender was proclaiming his willingness to be judged by the highest standards.

He therefore took unprecedented care over the composition and presentation of these works. They occupied him between 1798 and 1800 and he worked on them simultaneously, rewriting them as he acquired greater mastery of the medium. When eventually publishing them he chose the most imposing and dramatic of the six as his opening proclamation, **Op. 18 No. 1**.

Neither Haydn nor Mozart would have written a quartet movement quite as fragmented and restless as Beethoven's *Allegro con brio*. The slow movement that follows is even more intense. It moves through sorrow to tender recollection, before a hymn-like melody emerges. A troubled development section eventually yields to a return of the opening music, now racked with pain. Beethoven's correspondence with a friend, Karl Amenda, tells us that the scene of Romeo at Juliet's tomb was in the composer's mind as he wrote this movement.

The cheerful, witty *Scherzo* that follows seems to confirm that the slow movement was a dramatic portrayal rather than a personal testimony. And wit is also a characteristic of the finale. Especially playful is the repetition of phrases, with abrupt switches from major to minor and back again, as if there is some uncertainty as to which is correct. Geniality is the prevailing mood, although there is enough suspense to keep us on our toes.

Once settled in Vienna, the young Beethoven showed uncharacteristic restraint in terms of managing his own career. For almost a decade he withheld publication of significant works, revising them as he learnt more about his craft. His income and reputation came more from piano improvisations and from accompanying virtuoso instrumentalists.

As noted above, he worked on the Op. 18 Quartets for at least two years before they appeared in print. Some authorities regard **No. 3 in D** as the first to be composed, but it should be remembered that Beethoven had been revising them all simultaneously. It opens spaciously, with only the first violin's figuration

hinting at the true *allegro* tempo. However, the slowly gliding chords beneath soon gather energy and the music becomes more fluid, then skittish, leading us to a second subject that initially has a folk-dance character. The recapitulation varies this material rather than simply reiterating it.

The slow movement, unusually, is a sort of rondo in which the initial theme returns (reassuringly) between excursions into new material and tonal areas. The third movement is poised between the character of a minuet and a scherzo. After a trio section that is more of a continuation than a contrast, Beethoven once again eschews literal repetition and writes out a varied reprise of the first section.

Although the first part of the finale has its moments of tension, they seem merely part of a high-spirited game of chase. However, a development section creates genuine drama. Just when the music seems darkest and most mysterious, playful laughter breaks in again and carries us through to the teasingly off-hand ending.

Prince Nikolas Galitzin was one of the most generous, patient and tolerant patrons an artist could wish for. In November 1822 he wrote to Beethoven from St Petersburg asking if he could commission 'one, two or three quartets' for which he would be glad to pay whatever the composer thought appropriate. A fee of 50 ducats each for three quartets was agreed on and paid up front; but it was not until the end of 1825 that the commission was fulfilled.

The delay was not because of high-handedness or laziness on Beethoven's part. Not only was he working on the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis* at the time, but he was suffering from a severe intestinal illness that caused him immense pain and, he believed, might be fatal. By May of 1825, however, the 54-year-old composer was sufficiently recovered to be able to revisit the quartets, which had already been worked on. With its concept refashioned, the centrepiece of the A minor work would now be 'A hymn of thanksgiving from a convalescent, addressed the Divinity; in the Lydian mode'.

This *Heiliger Dankgesang* is a vast *Molto Adagio* that begins in the realm of antique church music (the 'Lydian mode'), rises in intensity via passages marked 'gradually recovering strength' and which ends in sublime stillness. It is preceded by, first, an *Allegro* that boldly modifies conventional sonata form; second, a minuet and trio that pays respect to Mozart. Following the slow movement comes a very brief, vivacious march. Then, after a recitative section, a sonata-rondo movement brings the work to an affirmative conclusion, but only after moments of genuine anxiety and doubt. The main theme of this finale had already appeared in Beethoven's sketchbooks as a possibility for the crowning movement of the Ninth Symphony, before he decided on a choral finale.

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