

BEETHOVEN

COMPLETE STRING QUARTETS

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VOL. IV



SUPER
AUDIO CD

QUARTETTO DI CREMONA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**String Quartet
in F major, Op. 18, No. 1** **28:48**

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| I. Allegro con brio | 9:17 |
| II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato | 9:02 |
| III. Scherzo. Allegro molto – Trio | 3:25 |
| IV. Allegro | 7:04 |

**String Quartet
in C sharp minor, Op. 131, No. 14** **38:55**

- | | |
|---|-------|
| I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo | 7:14 |
| II. Allegro molto vivace | 3:12 |
| III. Allegro moderato | 0:45 |
| IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile –
più mosso – Andante moderato e lusinghiero –
Adagio – Allegretto – Adagio ma non troppo
e semplice – Allegretto – Allegretto | 13:45 |
| V. Presto | 5:22 |
| VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante | 1:44 |
| VII. Allegro | 6:53 |

QUARTETTO DI CREMONA

Cristiano Gualco, Violine
Paolo Andreoli, Violine
Simone Gramaglia, Viola
Giovanni Scaglione, Violoncello

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“The last sighs” – Beethoven’s first String Quartet Op. 18

F major. The key of bright moods, often inspired (as in the model case of the Sixth Symphony) by the Arcadian peace of rural life which, during the time of the Napoleonic Wars, was already a deceptive idyll. The opening piece of Beethoven’s String Quartets Op. 18 – the “portal to Beethoven’s world of quartets”, according to the music scholar Ulrich Konrad – is also set in this pastoral key of F major. Since it is a known fact that this quartet, out of the set of six, was not the first to be written, it seems likely that Beethoven deliberately selected it to be his “No. 1”. After his previous chamber music works for less traditional combinations of instruments – such as the String Trios, Op. 9, or the Quartet for Piano and Winds – the first publication in the prestigious genre of the string quartet was to be an effective, successful work.

The opening *Allegro con brio* of the F major Quartet seemed to Beethoven to be a perfect candidate for this. With a powerful twisting figure from all four strings in unison – the movement’s main theme – Beethoven presents the defining source of energy for this entire movement. Inventing ever more variants and guises of the simple motif, he produces both dramatically gripping and soft, dance-like colours, whilst the actual secondary theme fades into the background amidst this pyrotechnical display of compositional artifice. And if Mozart, in the dedication of his six quartets to Haydn, admitted that these works had cost him some effort, then Beethoven must have sweated over the numerous musical combinations in this movement.

Around the end of 1798, Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz had commissioned Beethoven, for a generous fee of 400 guilders, to write six string quartets. As well as large-scale works, such as his First Sym-

phony or the Septet Op. 20, Beethoven worked feverishly on these quartets. In October 1800, he confirmed receipt of Lobkowitz's final instalment for his Op. 18, whose technical and compositional level remains in the tradition of sophisticated *Hausmusik*. A few years later, Beethoven was to withdraw the string quartet from the sphere of aristocratic connoisseurs and enthusiasts, from then on exclusively writing for specialised professional ensembles of the level of the Schuppanzigh Quartet.

Since all autograph scores of Op. 18 have been lost, it is difficult to reconstruct the order of composition from the sketches. A surviving copy of the Quartet in F major, which the composer had given as a present to his friend Carl Amenda, who was leaving Vienna, therefore represents a cast of fortune. "Dear Amenda!", Beethoven wrote in his dedication, "take this quartet as a small memorial of our friendship, and whenever you play it to yourself, remember our days

together and also how dearly devoted to you was, and always will be, your true and warm friend Ludwig van Beethoven." This would merely represent a heartfelt gesture, were it not for the fact that the copy for Amenda noticeably differs from the printed version, revealing Beethoven's honing hand.

The slow movement of the quartet has a mysterious air about it; a sketch book entry contains the following words about it: "Il prend le tombeau / desespoir / il se tue / les derniers soupirs" (He comes to the tomb / desperation / he kills himself / the last sighs). According to Amenda, this was full-blown programme music, depicting the tomb scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, ending, highly dramatically, with the protagonists' suicides. That would have made this movement, marked *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*, an early document of Beethoven's lifelong study of Shakespeare, who played a central role during the age of Romanticism. However,

the great arches of suspense with their sudden collapses, baroque sighing figures and lamenting rhetoric are little more than purely instrumental utterances. Tension finally crystallises in the coda with its twisting figures, general rests and a fortissimo outcry which may represent Romeo's (or Juliet's) "derniers soupirs".

After such externalisation, the *Scherzo* is a worldly, contrapuntally involved study whose middle section, however, returns to the fantastical sphere by way of the first violin's strangely timid figures. As a whole, the work, in its Bachian severity, seems aloof, nervous, and still a long way from the superior serenity of his late quartets.

**Fugue and popular tune –
the world of late Beethoven in the
String Quartet Op. 131**

Twenty-two years after completing his opus 18, Beethoven embarked on the first of his late string quartets. The com-

poser's final years from 1815, when the Congress of Vienna prescribed Europe's restoration and Beethoven's brother Karl died of consumption, were overshadowed by illness and financial worries, intermittent depression and the inglorious battle for the guardianship of his nephew Karl. It was within this personal vale of tears of the deaf Beethoven, going hand in hand with an increasing withdrawal from public life, that his wondrous late style matured.

The fact that he returned to the string quartet – alongside working on the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa solemnis* and his final piano sonatas – also had a "practical" reason: in 1823, the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh had returned to Vienna after a seven-year sojourn in Eastern Europe and immediately discussed new projects with Beethoven. Even as a twenty-year-old he had played in the so-called "boys' quartet" for Prince Lichnowsky and distinguished himself by performing Beethoven's Op. 18:

Beethoven had returned the favour by writing a humorous canon, *Lob auf den Dicken* (Praising the plump one) – the violinist was well known for his voluminous shape. The first Schuppanzigh Quartet was founded in 1808 at the palace of Count Razumovsky and continued to give well-attended subscription concerts for eight years, making Vienna the European centre for string quartet playing. “These four gentlemen seemed to have only one soul”, one reviewer enthused, “and doubtless nobody can boast of having heard a more perfect ensemble. [...] Mr Schuppanzigh knows to extend the enthusiasm flooding through him to his fellow performers so perfectly that it is no longer clear whether he influences them, or they him.”

Four of Beethoven’s five late string quartets were premièred by Schuppanzigh’s “Quatuor par excellence”, as it was praised by one contemporary critic. And the reviews of 1823 reveal the true

strength of the Schuppanzigh Quartet: it was not so much the impeccable playing of its leader, whose technique was not infallible and whose pronounced *portamento* – a mannerist slide from one note to the next – did not win the hearts of all members of the audience. Rather, it was Schuppanzigh’s expressive and *cantabile* playing, as well as the homogenous sound of the quartet, its precise reactions and the equality amongst the musicians, which made their mark on Beethoven’s quartet writing. Polyphonic interleaving, movement of motifs through all parts and abrupt contrasts in tempo, dynamics and articulation – all of which are typical features of the late works – necessitate perfectly coordinated playing which could no longer be entrenched behind the reign of the first violin.

Towards the end of his life, Beethoven was less worried than previously about “serving” an audience or a publishing

market. The music scholar Carl Dahlhaus once listed characteristic elements of musical late styles from Bach to Schoenberg. These include an anticipatory modernity without direct successors, an internal alienation from the external “style of the times”, as well as an archaic streak with which traditional techniques are suddenly, and without any transitional passages, juxtaposed with subjective ideas. Most of the late quartets, including the one in C sharp minor, confirm this perception.

Following diplomatic considerations, Beethoven dedicated his Quartet Op. 131 to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim who, as “field marshal lieutenant”, commanded the infantry regiment in which Beethoven’s nephew was serving. In summer 1826 Beethoven completed the quartet: six hundred surviving pages of associated sketches suggest that it is one of the composer’s most scrupulously honed

pieces. Also in this case several different layers of tradition are placed next to each other with little mediating material in between. The seven sections of the work, connected *attacca*, relinquish the classical four-movement form. And there is still discussion as to how many independent movements there actually are, since the third (*Allegro moderato*) and sixth (*Adagio, quasi un poco andante*) sections resemble short transitions in character.

It is particularly interesting to observe how Beethoven extends the traditional combination of slow introduction and allegro section of the first movement into an entirely new concept, finally doing without it at all. In the first section (*Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo*), the old form of the fugue is fulfilled in keeping with all rules of contrapuntal art; at the same time, the unusual marking of “molto espressivo” opens up romantic expressive spheres. Richard Wagner, a great admirer

of Beethoven's, interpreted the mournful mood from a romantic perspective as "Awakening in the morning of the day" which "during its course will not fulfil one wish, not one! But at the same time it is a penitential prayer, a consultation with God in the belief of the eternal good."

Beethoven continues the musical density of the fugue in the following movement by concentrating on almost only one thought, the lyrical main theme, rendering this *Allegro molto vivace* the dialectical counterpart of the *Adagio*. An *Allegro moderato* with a violin cadenza forms a recitative-like transition to a tuneful theme whose lyrical substance Beethoven puts to the test in seven variations and a concluding coda. Its enormous expansion and numerous changes in tempo and expression make this *Andante* the centrepiece of the work.

The building blocks of the scherzo (*Presto*), however, seem to be arranged in a stereotypical manner; the naively leap-

ing, popular tune theme is boosted with many surprising moments. The last *Adagio*, on the other hand, acts as a form of buffer zone before the final *Allegro* – a complex, intricate sonata rondo with a consistently hard-chiselled dance rhythm. The striking opening flourish and the jagged rhythm of the main theme seem to echo the "Great Fugue", the original finale of the String Quartet Op. 130. The fact that Beethoven now opens his C sharp minor quartet with a fugue and merely cites the gestures reveals his willingness to engage in a permanent, experimental restructuring of his works.

Michael Struck-Schloen

Translation: *Viola Scheffel*



During the past ten years the **Quartetto di Cremona** has matured into a string quartet of international renown, combining the Italian culture of string playing with an awareness of historical performance practice. As a quartet of the younger generation, the Quartetto di Cremona has acquired an excellent national and international reputation. Having for many years performed at the great international halls, it is often regarded as the successor to the famous Quartetto Italiano. The musical style of the Quartetto di Cremona is marked by a fruitful tension between Italian and German-Austrian influences. Following their academic studies the players continued their training with Piero Farulli of the Quartetto Italiano. He strongly favoured intuitive playing and a fervent, emotional, romantic and “Italian” approach to music. Afterwards the musicians pursued their studies with Hatto Beyerle of the Alban Berg Quartet. As an expert in the classical era, he represents a clear, classical, “German-Austrian” style, focusing on faithfulness to the original, form and structure as a basis for musical interpretation and inspiration.

Both teachers have left a lasting impression on the quartet and significantly influenced its musical style. The players naturally unite both poles, combining boisterous enthusiasm with a distinct sense for musical architecture, cultivating the fusion of structure and expression, external shape and internal passion.



The Quartetto di Cremona has performed at major festivals in Europe, South America, Australia and the United States, including Beethovenfest in Bonn, Bozar Festival in Brussels, Cork Festival in Ireland, Turku Festival in Finland, Perth Festival in Australia and Platonov Festival in Russia. They have performed at such prestigious international concert halls as the Konzerthaus Berlin, London's Wigmore Hall, Bargemusic in New York and Beethovenhaus Bonn.

Since 2010, the Quartetto di Cremona has been Ensemble in Residence at the Società del Quartetto in Milan and as such it is featured in numerous concerts and projects. In 2014, the 150th anniversary of the society, the co-operation will culminate in performances of the complete Beethoven String Quartets.

The quartet collaborates with artists such as Ivo Pogorelich, Pieter Wispelwey, Angela Hewitt, Larry Dutton, Antonio Meneses, Alessandro Carbonare, Andrea Lucchesini, Lilya Zilberstein and Lynn Harrell. Its repertoire ranges from the early works of Haydn to contemporary music; here their particular interest lies in works by Fabio Vacchi, Michele Dall'Ongaro, Helmut Lachenmann and Silvia Colasanti.

The musicians are also dedicated to teaching, giving masterclasses throughout Europe. In 2011 the quartet was entrusted with the leadership of the String Quartet Course at the Accademia Walter Stauffer in Cremona, closing a circle, for all four members received their initial training at this institution.



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recording: March 12 - 15, 2014
recording location: 'Fondazione Spinola Banna per l'Arte', Poirino
instruments: violin I: N. Amati, 1640 • violin II: P. Antonio Testore, 1750
viola: A. Poggi 1952 • violoncello: Marino Capicchioni, 1974
recording / executive producer: Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff
editing: Justus Beyer
photos: Elisa Caldana
art direction & design: AB•Design
e-mail: info@audite.de • http://www.audite.de
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