

South Bay Chamber Music Society
December 6 & 8, 2019

New Hollywood String Quartet:

Tereza Stanislav, violin

Rafael Rishik, violin

Rob Brophy, viola

Andrew Shulman, cello

Program Notes by Boglárka Kiss, D.M.A.

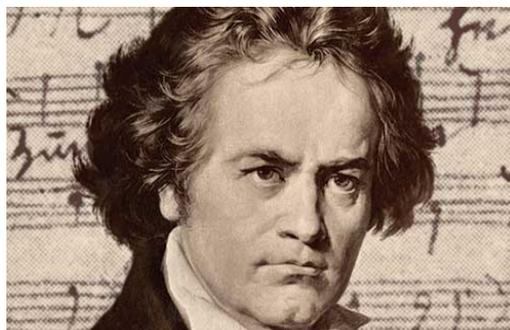


The string quartet

As a chamber music group, the string quartet consists of four instruments: two violins, a viola, and a cello. From its humble beginnings in outdoor serenades, the string quartet rose to become one of the most prominent chamber ensembles in classical music. Austrian composer Joseph Haydn is credited with elevating the genre of the string quartet in the mid-18th century, having written over sixty of them. Indeed, writing for a string quartet demands utter skill from composers: There are only four parts to write for, all of which have closely related sonic characters, and the medium requires logic and transparency of design within which to bring the musical drama to life. Since Haydn's time, practically all major composers have written string quartets, and the genre now boasts a vast repertoire.

Today's program presents three string quartets by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). His early quartets (Op. 18, Nos. 1-6) demonstrate his total mastery of the classical string quartet as developed by Haydn and Mozart. Out of the next sets, the Razumovsky Quartets (Op. 59, Nos. 1-3) are the most famous, with their heightened sense of drama and sensitivity.

The Late Beethoven String Quartets, which group includes his last five quartets and the Grosse Fuge, are the composer's last completed works. Their uncompromising intellectual complexity and their apparent rejection of the romantic pathos lend them a different kind of, but equally enduring appeal.



String Quartet No. 1 in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

Beethoven was in his late 20s when he embarked on a systematic study of the string quartets of Haydn and Mozart. He dedicated his first set of quartets (Op. 18, Nos. 1-6, published in 1801) to Haydn himself. These quartets demonstrate Beethoven's mastery of the classical style, hinting at the innovations to come in his later quartets.

In the set, the F major quartet is the most impressive in terms of size and expressive range. The opening movement is in sonata form, presenting a main melody in various transformations. Beethoven's sketches show that he composed the second movement, an Adagio, with the intention to depict the tomb scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The emotions presented by the ensemble are rather operatic throughout, further heightened by Beethoven's use of silence between high-tension chords.

The Scherzo is playful dance, featuring brilliant passages from the first violin in the Trio section. The final movement is a pleasant Allegro that, similarly to the first movement, treats the opening motive in many creative ways.

All six quartets from the Op. 18 set were dedicated to Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz, an enthusiastic patron of music and Beethoven. Aside from the quartets, the composer dedicated several of his symphonies, including the Fifth, to the aristocrat.

The following link provides a live rendition of the work:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDonq3gQqf8>

String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135

This work was the last that Beethoven finished, only a few months before his death in 1827. Many of his late quartets are experimental and robust in scope, but this is not the case with this work: Opus 135 is airy and playful, in some ways simpler than its immediate siblings.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form, and is in some ways reminiscent of Haydn's style. It features remarkably short phrases and abrupt melodic and harmonic shifts, demonstrating Beethoven's absolute mastery of the form.

The second movement is also traditional in form, but not in style. The Scherzo and Trio abounds in rhythmic comedy with off-beats and playful obfuscation of the meter as well as modulating chromatic harmonies and dynamic extremes.

In deep contrast is the serene third movement, which presents four continuously unfolding variations on a theme, featuring harmonic changes, a canon, and some rhythmic elaboration. In many ways, this movement is the emotional center of the entire work, with its contemplative beauty.

The final movement, also in sonata form, bears the inscription, “The Difficult Resolution.” The slow introduction is marked “Muss es sein” — must it be? The cello and viola seem to be asking that question, but soon the music breaks into the brisk main section, joyful and affirmative, marked “Es muss sein!” — it must be! Much of the movement then proceeds with playfulness until the “Must it be?” slow introductory motif returns suddenly and with barely any warning, only to give way to the ending with its final boisterous affirmation.

Many theories have emerged about just what this “difficult resolution” may have been. Beethoven’s note to his publisher hints that it might simply be the necessity of finishing the composition, and bidding farewell to a favorite genre, “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. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto, “The Difficult Resolution—Must it be?—It must be, it must be!”

Listen to a rendition of the work here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikJBmhGIHY4>

“Grosse Fuge” in B-flat Major, Op. 133

Originally, the “Grosse Fuge” (“Grand Fugue”) was the concluding movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet, Op. 130. After the unsuccessful premiere of the work, Beethoven and his publisher agreed to remove the fugue, substituting it with an alternate finale. The fugue was eventually published in 1827 as an entirely separate work.

The musical technique known as the *fugue* goes back to the Renaissance, perfected by Johann Sebastian Bach during the Baroque. Just about every composer since then has used this technique, from Haydn to Shostakovich. Beethoven is arguably the greatest master of the fugue after Bach, and fugues appear all through his piano sonatas, string quartets and symphonies.

It was not unusual to hear a fugue as the finale of a string quartet during Beethoven’s lifetime. What was confounding about the Grand Fugue was its length, its emotional intensity and its extreme obsession with dissonance. This monumental piece baffled not only the audience when they first heard it, but also critics and musicians alike. Reactions included, “repellent” and “incomprehensible.” Quite a different reaction came from Igor Stravinsky who famously remarked about the Grand Fugue, “[it is] an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever.”

Around sixteen minutes long, the work is far longer than any fugue Bach wrote. As with much of Beethoven's late music, the fugue has been analyzed from many different perspectives. Here is a relatively straightforward description:

The Grand Fugue divides into five parts. The first part is a series of brief snippets, each of which alludes to a section of the ensuing fugue, but in reverse order.

The second part is the fugue proper, where, according to the tradition of the fugue, a melodic theme is introduced by one player then picked up in imitation (i.e. like a canon) by each successive player until all four players are engaged in a complicated musical mesh. Beethoven makes things a bit more interesting from the start however, in that he has not one but two subjects going at the same time, creating in essence a double fugue, which may sound utterly chaotic and complex at times.

The third part of the Grand Fugue is a section of repose and contrast to the blistering fugue. Where the fugue is dark and dissonant, the third section is bright and lyrical all at a slower pace. Really a kind of fugue in itself, the music is built from exactly the same material as the primary fugue, but with a vastly different sonic palette.

The fourth part is the return of the original fugue, but here Beethoven subjects the original material to transformations including making the melodic theme longer, then shorter, playing it upside down and even backwards. Beethoven applies so much variation to the material that, in places, the music appears to explode into complete random chaos fraught with harsh dissonance, skewed rhythmic patterns and seemingly ungraspable complexity.

The fifth and final part is Beethoven coming to our rescue, where the fugue dissipates, the happy music from the middle reappears and everything is transformed into bright triumph if not outright humor.

It may be interesting to note that the final movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat known as the "Hammerklavier" follows nearly the identical formal structure yielding a monstrous fugue of practically the same length, albeit in a much brighter mood.

Please click here for a rendition of the Grand Fugue:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxzHQrFuDkk>

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