

Program Notes by John Largess

2020 Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival

The Complete Beethoven String Quartets

Miró Quartet

Week 1: **“The Journey Begins”** Thursday, July 16, 2020

String Quartet No. 3 in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3

String Quartet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2

“Early Influences” Friday, July 17, 2020

String Quartet No. 5 in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5

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

“What Does the Future Hold?” Saturday, July 18, 2020

String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18, No. 4

String Quartet No. 6 in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6

EARLY QUARTETS: Opus 18 - Beethoven at 30

Why are Beethoven’s Opus 18 quartets not performed in the numerological order of No. 1 – No. 6?

The story of the order of composition of the Opus 18 quartets is particularly interesting, as is the existence of two different versions of Op. 18, No. 1. What we can piece together reveals a lot about Beethoven’s personality and his process as a composer during the two years that he worked on this project.

What we know comes primarily from two of Beethoven’s surviving composition sketch books from 1798–99: the first (called Grasnick 1) contains sketches for all the movements of No. 3, which is clearly the first quartet of the set, and seems to be in the style of his idol, Mozart. The second sketchbook (Grasnick 2) contains ideas for all four movements of No. 1, followed by all of No. 2, and then by all of No. 5 (and possibly a line from No. 4), amongst bits and pieces of several other compositions that were also being written at the same time. Scholars theorize that there was a lost third sketchbook which could have contained the early ideas for quartets No. 4 and/or No. 6, among other pieces. There is also a group of mixed loose manuscript sheets (some of which are sketches of Op. 18, No. 6, but no sheets exist of Op. 18, No. 4) forming the so called “Autograph 19E” from spring of 1800, but any conclusions about the timeline of No. 4 and No. 6 drawn from what little we have today are suspect at best.

As far as the two versions of No. 1, Beethoven gave his friend Karl Amenda a completed copy of its score in June of 1799 (this copy is in the Beethovenhaus in Bonn today). However, later that year Beethoven wrote to his friend telling him to “show no one this quartet, as I am currently revising it, now that finally I know how to write quartets!” And actually, the later version which emerged (probably the following spring) has almost no bars of any movement that are identical to the earlier version, and in particular, the first and last movements were substantially

recomposed. Apparently, Beethoven also threw out the original completed slow movement of No. 2 (as it was in the sketchbook), and wrote the interesting hybrid slow/fast movement we have today. This is maybe the first example of Beethoven's life-long trend of being perpetually dissatisfied with some works, constantly rewriting and revising them, often with no "final version."

On a different note, although we have sketches for all four movements of No. 5, we don't know much about its completion except for this interesting tidbit: his friends reported him spending hours copying out by hand the score of his favorite Mozart quartet, K. 646, also in A Major – and No. 5 does show many similarities to Mozart's quartet, especially in the variation movement.

It's also interesting to note that when Opus 18 came to publication, Beethoven cared more about making a strong impression on his public than being truthful about the order of composition: the first edition came out in 1801 in two sets of three quartets each, and Beethoven put the most impactful and dramatic quartets first in each set (No. 1 and No. 4). But our order for this week's programs attempts to take the behind-the-scenes story more into account than the numbers themselves, in order to help you follow Beethoven's own creative mind and its process through the music: we begin with No. 3, then No. 2, and then No. 5, then No. 1 (which, though begun slightly earlier than No. 2, took its final form much later), No. 4, and No. 6.

Envision the end of the 18th century: a time of war, tremendous social upheaval, and incredible change. The Revolutions in America and France were forcing the entire world into a new way of thinking. Everywhere, the old guard was struggling to hold on to unwieldy and outdated power in the face of a new society and a new conception of one's self. After all, didn't we all have a calling to be something better, to possess the freedom of a higher state in which no one could ever be a slave of the wealthy, the privileged, or the powerful? All of Europe seethed with armed conflict while teetering simultaneously on the brink of a complete transformation. As things fell apart, the modern world as we know it was painfully being born.

Into this picture stepped a short and sickly 22-year-old kid, with curly coal-black hair (in our time he would be fresh out of college), coming to the big city of Vienna from the boondocks. He had a talent for playing the piano, and had become a child star back home in Bonn. Just like many child stars of today, his childhood had been trashed by a pushy (and alcoholic) father, who was determined to make his talented little Ludwig into a famous wonder kid. His mother died when he was 17, and at 19 he found himself forced to take care of his younger brothers, while his father's own mediocre music career crashed and burned. Now, at 22, Ludwig had finally broken free. Finally, he had his opportunity to make the big time in the big city. This was his chance to prove to everyone, himself included, that he could be a star.

The next five years saw him climb up the career ladder step-by-step on his own. His musical talent was matched by a gift for self-promotion. He became the private pupil (almost like being an intern today) of famous "older guys" with big names in the business, such as Haydn and Salieri. Impatient with their discipline and authority, he felt he had to sometimes unwillingly follow their advice in order to learn what he still didn't know... and he used their connections to network even further. But what really got his career moving was his set of new friendships with the rich, the artsy, and the trendy. The wealthy and hip took him into their set; soon he was appearing at every soiree, going on vacations with diplomats, and creating scandalous scenes. He pursued women, many women: usually rich, beautiful, "unavailable" women. He made them feel faint at the intensely passionate way he improvised pieces at the piano. People just couldn't get enough!

He was a rock star, the it-guy, a tabloid success, but what he had always really wanted was just to write music. As a child he was beaten by his father when caught improvising his own music at the piano instead of practicing; now he could use the opportunity his fame presented to get his own music heard by an international audience. First, he published some showy solo pieces he had played live himself in concert and some fun ensemble pieces: serenades, songs, trios. He had been toying with most of the ideas for these pieces since his childhood. When this music sold crazily and the publishers clamored for more, Beethoven felt it was time to give them something else, something really new, something radical, something that people thought that a young pianist couldn't do.

And so the String Quartet became the first really serious form in which Beethoven took on the establishment, as he transformed himself from performer to composer. He wanted badly for his quartets to be absolutely new and outstanding, for now his career depended on them in more ways than one: he had been hiding from everyone for the last two years the terrible secret that he was going deaf. Fighting depression, he saw his social life starting to unravel, and by the age of 30, he knew for sure he wouldn't be able to perform live much longer. The question of the rest of his career; really, the rest of his life, seemed to depend on the answers he gave in these six pieces.