

Program Notes by John Largess

## **2020 Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival**

### **The Complete Beethoven String Quartets**

#### **Miró Quartet**

**Week 2:**     **“Razumovsky Quartets: Music for the Future”** Thursday, July 23, 2020  
String Quartet No. 7 in F Major, *Razumovsky* Op. 59, No. 1

**“Russian Themes and Heavenly Dreams”** Friday, July 24, 2020  
String Quartet No. 8 in E minor, *Razumovsky* Op. 59, No. 2

**“The Hero, the Master”** Saturday, July 25, 2020  
String Quartet No. 9 in C Major, *Razumovsky* Op. 59, No. 3

#### **MIDDLE PERIOD: Opus 59 - The “Razumovsky” Quartets**

The three string quartets of Beethoven’s Opus 59, despite being three of his most enduringly popular pieces today, incited some of the most antagonistic and negative responses that his music would ever receive. His student Carl Czerny reported, “When Schuppanzigh’s quartet first played the F Major Quartet, they laughed and were convinced Beethoven was playing a trick on them and that it was not the quartet he had promised.” “Surely you do not consider this music?” asked the bemused violinist Felix Radicati. “Not for you,” replied the confident composer, “but for a later age.”

Revolutionary, visionary, unprecedented in their grand and sweeping scope, the three quartets of the Opus 59 trilogy made greater instrumental and emotional demands than any string quartet yet written at that time. Even two centuries after their premiere, they remain historical landmarks of the quartet genre. The birth of the touring professional quartet and the economy of the international chamber music scene can be said to begin historically with the appearance of these works. They are benchmarks by which all composers of string quartets since Beethoven have judged their own creations, and remain the standard by which quartet players today still measure their own acumen and achievement.

The six years (1800–1806) between the completion of the Opus 18 quartets and the completion of the Opus 59s, though perhaps the most creative and productive of Beethoven’s entire life, were shot through with intense personal struggles. He endured a painfully failed love affair and he was shamed by his younger brother’s shotgun wedding to a woman he loathed; his increasing deafness became ever more difficult to hide and was threatening to derail his professional and personal life. In 1802 he wrote a document, known today as the Heiligenstadt Testament, to be read like a will in the case of his untimely death. This declaration reads as a personal statement of his determination to overcome his personal sufferings, to conquer through music. Although addressed to his family and friends, it is a message to the world at large and to posterity: Beethoven the “hero” in the realm of art refuses to let his act of creation be defined by his suffering. In fact, the trials he faces only spur him on.

The years following this testament were studded with success as Beethoven literally conquered every important genre in music one by one, each time with a groundbreaking and perennially popular work: Ballet – *Creatures of Prometheus*, Solo Piano – *Waldstein Sonata*, Symphony – *Eroica*, Oratorio – *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, Opera – *Fidelio*, Concerto – the Violin and Piano Concerto No. 4; this list is by no means exhaustive. By the fall of 1806, while putting the finishing touches on this heroic series of quartets, Beethoven, no doubt looking back on each of these triumphs at the moment of completion, writes in the margins of his Op 59, No. 3 sketch: “let your deafness be no longer a secret, even in art.” He had truly triumphed, most especially in the face of his own fears, and left an enduring and personal message of struggle, hope, and valor for anyone to listen to in the Opus 59 trilogy.

These three quartets speak in a new language, which was to become the expected standard in years to come. At once intimate and revolutionary, personal yet accessible to all, unique yet universal, they have become the gold standard for which any professional quartet was and is to be judged. These works obtain their essential life from a deep understanding of the fundamental qualities of the four quartet instruments and their basic interaction, yet are endlessly demanding in their emotional subtlety. John Dalley of the Guarneri Quartet said, “In the Razumovsky quartets the whole sonority of the string quartet undergoes a change. The four parts are more nearly equal in prominence; the lower voices have more resonance. The melodies have a more sustained cantilena quality. There is more of a ‘concerted’ sound – one could say a true string quartet sound – fuller and richer than ever before.” Moreover, the three quartets together form a triptych, almost a single great three act epic drama, linked as they are by continuous (yet surprising) references to each other’s keys, motives, and structure, and by their various “Russian” themed movements. Even so, each piece on its own displays a strong but multifaceted individual persona: whether spacious, tragic, and rambunctious like No. 1; turbulent, combative, but with moments of tranquility like No. 2; or victorious, exotic, and playful like No. 3.

The demanding style of the Opus 59s, which required (and still require) months of specialized ensemble practice to adequately perform, truly heralded the birth of the professional touring string quartet as we know it today. The technical challenges demanded of each player, and the mastery of ensemble needed, placed them well beyond the reach of amateurs, and even beyond the scope of the professional “pickup” group. Shortly after their publication in 1808, such writers as George Thomson in Edinburgh already lamented their difficulty, claiming that there were fewer than a dozen people in Scotland who could take a part in them, and not even one who could play the first violin part in all three. It was on programs flaunting remarkably polished and brilliantly played Opus 59s that the Müller Quartet made the very first string quartet concert tours of Europe in 1833 and the years following; these four brothers, who “specialized” in quartet playing and in Beethoven, were providing for the many music lovers of the time the only “close to ideal” performances of this already famous music that they would ever hear. It was the challenge of the Opus 59s that drew new audiences from every walk of life to their concerts to hear these works for themselves. A new audience and a new type of musician were being born.

Perhaps more than any other pieces in the repertoire, the message of this music speaks for itself. This is truly music written by one to inspire all, despite suffering and setbacks, to great deeds; to be true to yourself and to the promise within. It is music that looks always with heroism and hope to the future. It is not about the past. In Beethoven’s own words, this is music “for you,” for each of us, now in this “later age,” and for every later age to come.