

BEETHOVEN

Volume 3

COMPLETE

The Late Quartets

STRING

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QUARTETS

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STRING
QUARTETS

Volume 3 The Late Quartets

DISC 1

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

Quartet No. 12 in E-flat major, Op. 127
(36:04)

- I. Maestoso – Allegro (6:41)
- II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile (14:05)
- III. Scherzando vivace (8:21)
- IV. Finale (6:44)

Quartet No. 13 in B-flat major, Op. 130
(38:16)

- I. Adagio ma non troppo – Allegro (9:28)
- II. Presto (2:02)
- III. Andante con moto ma non troppo (6:56)
- IV. Alla danza tedesca (Allegro assai) (3:28)
- V. Cavatina (Adagio molto espressivo) (6:03)
- VI. Finale (Allegro) (9:58)

DISC 2

1 Grosse Fuge in B-flat major, Op. 133
(15:09)

Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 (37:27)

- I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo (6:20)
- II. Allegro molto vivace (2:51)
- III. Allegro moderato – Adagio (0:47)
- IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile (13:41)
- V. Presto (5:14)
- VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante (1:56)
- VII. Allegro (6:33)

DISC 3

Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (42:52)

- I. Assai sostenuto – Allegro (9:20)
- II. Allegro ma non tanto (7:22)
- III. *Heiliger Dankesang* . . .
Molto adagio – Andante (17:10)
- IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace (2:22)
- V. Allegro appassionato (6:25)

Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135 (23:01)

- I. Allegretto (6:31)
- II. Vivace (2:54)
- III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo (6:41)
- IV. *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*
Grave, ma non troppo tratto –
Allegro (6:44)

TT: (3:13:20)

Beethoven's Late Quartets

by Nancy November

From the time of Beethoven's middle-period quartets, in the early 1800s, there were dissenting voices — listeners who did not unequivocally endorse Beethoven's quartets because of their difficulty. This dissent, of course, served to emphasize Beethoven's exceptional position, as did the performers' complaints. An early review of the String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 127, points to this typical ambivalence: some listeners extolled Beethoven as a great innovator, others considered his work that of a deaf madman:

This quartet is one of the last works of the recently deceased famous composer van Beethoven and, for this reason alone, a notable appearance. But this can also be seen in another light . . . some say one could find nothing more beautiful and magnificent than the above quartet . . . others say: no, it is completely vague, entirely chaotic; there are also no clear thoughts to be extracted, in every bar there are sins against the generally accepted rules; the composer — deaf in any case — must have been crazy when he brought this work to life.¹

Perhaps the most striking movement, in terms of innovations, is the massive second. In A-flat major, it comprises six variations and a coda and follows a complex tonal progression related to the finale of the Ninth Symphony. It is likely that many contemporaneous listeners heard no “method”

in the sequence of keys: the fifth variation is particularly cryptic with its enharmonic shift.

Performers, for their part, underscored the necessity of rehearsal and repeated performance for understanding Beethoven's quartets. For example, when cellist Joseph Linke received the performing parts for Op. 127 shortly after its first, unsuccessful performance by violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh's quartet, he decided to program it twice in one evening at a house concert. This repetition was mainly for the benefit of the listeners; but the performers also recognised the need for repeated rehearing for an understanding of all four parts. They accepted Beethoven's new demands (albeit with some complaints) seeming to understand, at least partly, that the excellence of a "Beethoven string quartet" was tied up with its extreme difficulty. In a conversation book from 1825, professional violinist Karl Holz observed to Beethoven: "We rehearse only your quartets, not those of Haydn and Mozart, [which] work better without rehearsal."² Beethoven was lucky to gain Schuppanzigh as an influential promoter of his music in early 19th-century Vienna. Schuppanzigh, for his part, built his concert series around Beethoven's quartets. In the 1820s, performers' reputations were being built (Linke, Joseph Böhm, Joseph Mayseder) and even temporarily damaged (Schuppanzigh) by their performances of Beethoven's late quartets, especially Op. 127.

The Schuppanzigh Quartet premiered the next quartet, in B-flat major Op. 130, on March 21, 1826. It provoked similar puzzlement and ambivalence. One writer for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* described it that year as "incomprehensible, like Chinese," and "a confusion of Babel."² The main offender was the finale, the *Große Fuge*, with its tortuous subject and incredible length, requiring stamina from performers and listeners alike. Beethoven's Viennese publisher, Mathias Artaria, fretted about the commercial prospects of the piece and urged Beethoven to replace the fugue with a new finale. Beethoven, who clearly took an interest in his music's reception, agreed, and the *Große Fuge* was published separately in 1827 as Op. 133. Artaria also came up with the idea of a four-hand piano arrangement during Beethoven's visit to the publisher's premises in April 1826. This was another way to broker the work to a somewhat wary public. Artaria asked Anton Halm to complete this. Beethoven disapproved of Halm's work, however (possibly due to Halm's treatment of the fugue subject), and undertook the arrangement himself.

Op. 130 exhibits several traits characteristic of Beethoven's "late" style, in particular the striking oppositions, which could just as soon be viewed as unresolved paradoxes. One example is the placement of miniature movements alongside those of great length. The first movement is over

13 minutes long, comprising a slow introduction and Allegro in sonata form. This is followed by a Presto that flies by in around 2 minutes. This telescoping is also found in Op. 131, where the third movement takes around 45 seconds to play, and is followed by an extensive, multi-sectional set of variations lasting around 14 minutes.

The subject of the *Große Fuge* is integral to the concept of Op. 130 and provides a crucial link between three of the late quartets, Op. 127, 130, and 132. They are thematically linked by the second tetrachord (the top four notes) of the harmonic minor scale. In these works, Beethoven demonstrated his fascination with the wide interval of three semitones in that scale, arranging the tetrachord in different and characteristic permutations in each work. In the *Große Fuge* subject, the tetrachord is heard in its most angular permutation, with a rising major sixth between notes 1 and 3 of the tetrachord. This gives the work its characteristically difficult motion, which creates corresponding difficulties for the performers and sits in direct contrast to the “vocal” aesthetics found elsewhere in the late quartets, perhaps most significantly in the beautiful, smooth, and thoroughly “vocal” cavatina that would have immediately preceded it were the fugue heard as the finale of Op. 130. This leads to a further paradox in the late quartets: the contrast

of “vocal,” lyrical writing, which sounds like song, with music that could only be realized on the four stringed instruments — the latter encapsulated by the angular, difficult motions of the *Große Fuge*’s subject.

Today, the *Große Fuge* might be considered a showpiece for performers. When it was first performed, however, it was first and foremost a tremendous challenge, physically, mentally, and technically. The *Große Fuge* demands extraordinary listening attention and physical aptitude from the performers to stay together and in tune during around 15 minutes of performance time. Back then, with performers using gut strings, it was impossible to play the fugue through without the instruments gradually slipping out of tune. So the performers’ fingers, hands, and torsos constantly had to twist and adjust.

Yet despite these works’ physicality, increasingly less attention has been paid to their performed and embodied nature. Beethoven’s “late” period, in general, has increasingly been seen to contain a particular group of works created when the fully-deaf Beethoven was able to express himself unencumbered by influence (and indeed noise) from the sound world around him.^{3,4} The late quartets, in particular, have been considered a special group of “very late” masterpieces, cut off from contextual and social moorings, including

performance difficulties, and expressive only of Beethoven's innermost thoughts and feelings.

This could not be further from the truth — perhaps most especially in the case of the String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, where views about the work's meanings became ever more restricted in later reception.⁵ This penultimate work is often considered Beethoven's melancholy swansong. Quoting *Faust*, Wagner wrote that the opening Adagio “is surely the saddest thing ever said in notes, I would term the awakening on the dawn of a day ‘that in its whole long course shall ne'er fulfil one wish, not one wish!’”⁶ Donald Francis Tovey considered the second movement a “sonata form without a development.” Joseph Kerman, declared each movement “flat.”⁷ These later writers, after Wagner, tended to discuss Op. 131 in terms of “lack,” characterizing it by what it is not.

By contrast, earlier spokespeople on the work, such as Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Adolph Bernhard Marx, heard Beethoven's quartet as full and productive. Schumann wrote that Opp. 127 and 131 “have a grandeur . . . which no words can express. They seem to me to stand . . . on the extreme boundary of all that has hitherto been attained by human art and imagination.”⁸ Beethoven himself emphasized the work's abundance and novelty, remarking to a friend that

he would find in it “a new manner of part-writing and, thank God, no less fantasy than before.”⁹ Op. 131 was Beethoven's favorite of the late quartets, perhaps because of this plenitude and his ability to go on innovating in this, his penultimate string quartet.

But listeners were put off by these same elements. Why could not the great composer, who was, by this stage, one of the most revered authors of string quartets of his time, stay with the tried and trusted formulas? Audiences at Schuppanzigh's 1820s quartet concerts in Vienna expected a string quartet to be a lengthy, “serious,” four-movement work, emphasizing sonata form in the outer movements and motivic working between parts, and exhibiting an overall tonal plan based on one or two primary areas. In Op. 131, Beethoven disrupts these expectations in every way. Comprising seven movements and a wide-ranging tonal plan, it is more like a large-scale fantasia than a string quartet — just as the composer said. It provided considerable challenges for its original listeners and performers. Listeners of the time were used to applauding after each movement, clapping and commenting during particularly pleasing passages, and, with thunderous applause, calling for a *da capo* repeat. But this work, with its directions for the players to move on *attacca* (immediately) after each movement, left no room for such interaction. Indeed, Beethoven

left no room for the players to tune, provoking a question (or complaint) from violinist Karl Holz in Beethoven's conversation book.

The String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, composed just before Op. 131, was considered easier for listeners, especially for its "lighter" more "natural" scherzo.¹⁰ Vocal gestures pervade Beethoven's late quartets, such as the recitative-like passages in the third movement of Op. 131 and preceding the final movement of Op. 132, the Cavatina fifth movement of Op. 130, and the motet-like third movement of Op. 132. These were also popularity-winners in an era during which the Viennese were opera-mad and flocked to hear Rossini in the theaters, as well as performing his operas in arrangement in their homes.

In the third movement of Op. 132, Beethoven made an autobiographical reference to his own experience of illness. Such programmatic titles informed players about desired interpretations, but not the listening public, who would generally not have had program notes or scores, at least not at first. The third movement is titled "Heiliger Dankegesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart" (holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the deity, in the Lydian mode). It opens chorally, with smooth, slow, closely-spaced, homorhythmic motion, suggesting a prayer. Lively D major passages, contrasting in just about every

parameter (rhythm, register, harmony, texture, tonality), are marked "Neue Kraft fühlend" (feeling new strength).

There were other popularizing elements in these late quartets, too. In an 1825 review of a semi-private concert given by Joseph Linke, the commentator noted that the trio/scherzo of Op. 132 delighted the Viennese audience with "naïve naturalness, charming colour, lovely melodies, and piquant spice."¹¹ An 1825 Viennese critic acknowledged this too, remarking of Op. 132: "What our musical Jean Paul has given here is big, gorgeous, unusual, surprising, and original; it needs not only to be often heard but rather really studied."¹² "Jean Paul" is a reference to Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825), a German Romantic writer known for his humorous novels and stories.

The final two movements of Op. 132 are a prime example of Jean Paulian irony. The fourth movement opens with a joviality completely at odds with the initial outpouring of sentiment. Adolf Bernhard Marx (1795–1866), who reviewed Beethoven's late quartets for the Berlin *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1828, observed that Op. 132 could be compared to the works of the German poet, dramatist, and writer Heinrich von Kleist in terms of its multileveled, almost over-stimulated sources of meaning, feeling, and narrative. These works were ready-made for the elite Viennese

audiences of the time (including Beethoven's patrons) who would appreciate such drama. As noted scholar Leon Botstein put it: "Like a tragic drama, these pieces contained monologues, soliloquies, dialogues, abrupt changes in scene and mood, and moments of description, as well as gestures of response, inquiry, and deep meditation."¹³

The late quartets were not written in exactly the order implied by their opus numbers. Rather, the order was: Op. 127, Opp. 130 and 132 (composed simultaneously), Op. 131, then Op. 135. The last movement Beethoven completed was the Allegro substitute finale for the Op. 130 quartet, written to replace the Große Fuge. Beethoven's ill health played into this compositional schedule. He was bedridden for a month in 1825, a key year for the composition of the first three quartets. Op. 132 was clearly inspired by his recovery, containing the *Heiliger Dankgesang*.

Beethoven composed the String Quartet in F major, Op. 135 in 1826.¹⁴ It was the last major multi-movement work he completed. The piece was not premiered until 1828, the year after his death, when the Schuppanzigh Quartet gave it a

public airing. Op. 135 also contains programmatic titles, and a "difficult" ending (as was originally the case with Op. 130), but is much smaller in scale than the other late quartets (especially the seven-movement C-sharp minor quartet that came immediately before). The introductory chords of Op. 135's final movement contain the words "Muß es sein?" (Must it be?) to which the faster main theme of the movement responds, "Es muß sein!" (It must be!). The whole movement is headed, "Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß" (The Difficult Decision). Altogether, the work seems to guide the performers more than the others as to its meanings, but it still contains a puzzle: what "Decision"?

Nancy November is Professor of Musicology at The University of Auckland, New Zealand and the author of numerous books including Beethoven's Theatrical Quartets: Opp. 59, 74, and 95 (Cambridge University Press, 2013), Cultivating String Quartets in Beethoven's Vienna (Boydell Press, 2017), and Beethoven's Symphonies Arranged for the Chamber: Sociability, Reception, and Canon Formation (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Sources

¹ *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* 1 (1827/28), 303–4.

² *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 28/19 (1826), 310.

³ Grita Herre and Karl-Heinz Köhler (eds.), *Ludwig van Beethovens Konversationshefte* (11 vols. Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1968–2001), vol. 8 (1981), 259.

⁴ Kristen Marta Knittel, "Wagner, Deafness, and the Reception of Beethoven's Late Style," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/1 (1998), 49–82.

⁵ On this subject see my *Beethoven's String Quartet in C-Sharp Minor*, Op. 131. Oxford Keynotes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶ Richard Wagner, *Beethoven: Richard Wagner* (1870), trans. William Ashton Ellis (Auckland: Floating Press, 2008), 58.

⁷ Donald Francis Tovey, 'Some Aspects of Beethoven's Art Forms', in *Essays and Lectures on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 288; Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1967), 333.

⁸ Robert Schumann, *Music and Musicians, Essays and Criticisms*, trans. F. R. Ritter (Oxford University Press, 1877), 391.

⁹ Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven. Eine Kunst-Studie*, 5 vols (Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe, 1855–60), 217.

¹⁰ On the Möser quartet's performance in Berlin in 1828, see *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 30/22 (1828), 363.

¹¹ 'das vorhergehende Trio, welches mit seiner naiven Natürlichkeit, mit dem reizenden Colorit, den lieblichen Melodien, der pikanten Würze', Anon., *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 27/51 (1825), 840.

¹² 'Was unser musikalischer Jean Paul hier gegeben hat, ist abermals gross, herrlich, ungewöhnlich, überraschend und originell, muss aber nicht nur öfters gehört, sondern ganz eigentlich studiert werden', *Ibid.*

¹³ Leon Botstein, 'The Patrons and Publics of the Quartets', in *The Beethoven Quartet Companion*, ed. Robert Winter and Robert Martin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 105.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the reception of Op. 135, see Kristen Marta Knittel, "'Late, Last, and Least': on Being Beethoven's Quartet in F major, op. 135," *Music & Letters* 87/1 (2006), 16–51.

DOVER QUARTET



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from the Brescian School, early 18th century

Camden Shaw: Frank Ravatin, Vannes, 2010

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