

Beethoven's Razumovsky Quartets

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) - Quartet in F Op.59, No.1 (1806) [38']

Allegro; Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando; Adagio molto e mesto; "Thème Russe": Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven - Quartet in E minor Op.59, No. 2 (1806) [35']

Allegro; Molto adagio (Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento); Allegretto (with the second section marked Maggiore – Theme russe); Finale. Presto

Ludwig van Beethoven - Quartet in C Op.59, No. 3 (1806) [30']

Andante con moto – Allegro vivace; Andante con moto quasi allegretto; Menuetto (Grazioso); Allegro molto

By 1803, Beethoven was starting to be established in Vienna. No longer the new young composer, he was known as a piano virtuoso and had written landmark compositions in a variety of genres. Between 1803 and 1806 he produced a remarkable amount of work, the *Waldstein Sonata*, the *Piano Sonata Op.54*, *Symphony No. 3 'Eroica'*, the *Triple Concerto*, *Appassionata Sonata*, *Piano Concerto No. 4*, *Symphony No. 4*, *Violin Concerto*, *Coriolan Overture* and the first version of *Fidelio*. He also received a commission from Count Andreas Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, which became the three Opus 59 string quartets.

The quartets were commissioned for Razumovsky's new house string quartet led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the group that would give the premieres of Beethoven's late string quartets. Schuppanzigh's Razumovsky quartet is considered the first professional string quartet. Schuppanzigh had given violin lessons to Beethoven when he first came to Vienna and the two remained friends, and it was Schuppanzigh's dedication to the string quartet repertoire which allowed Beethoven to transform the technical demands made on players.

Beethoven's previous quartets date from 1801 and his new ones were significantly different. For a start, the first quartet is over forty minutes long (far longer than before), made far greater technical demands on the players and has a very wide emotional range. Legend has it that when the violinist Felix Radicati complained about the quartets, saying that they were not music, Beethoven commented 'Oh, they are not for you, but for a later age'.

By 1806, Beethoven was, if not coming to terms with his hearing loss, at least beginning to accept it and some commentators think that some of the apparently strange passages in the quartets may be the composer writing about the effects of his hearing loss.

In 1807 the *Musikalische Zeitung* referred to the quartets as 'Three new very long and difficult Beethoven string quartets', going on to say 'The conception is profound and the construction excellent, but they are not easily comprehended – with the possible exception of the third in C Major, which cannot but appeal to intelligent lovers of music because of its originality, melody and harmonic power'.

The first quartet opens with an expansive sonata-form *Allegro* with a fugato in the development and, in what was to become a typical Beethoven gesture, after the development when Beethoven re-establishes the home key he then delays the recapitulation of the opening material. The second movement, scherzo, is unusual as it does not have a trio, it is in sonata form, followed by a majestic slow movement in almost predominantly minor keys. As a complement to Count Razumovsky, the brilliant finale is based on a Russian theme.

The second quartet starts tersely and is full of sharp contrasts, and Beethoven asks for the whole recapitulation and development to be repeated, whilst the hymn-like second movement was, according to Carl Czerny, inspired by Beethoven's contemplation of the starry night sky and thoughts

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of music of the spheres. The Scherzo also uses a Russian theme in the trio, heard twice, harmonised in an unconventional, perhaps even skittish way (did he resent Count Razumovsky providing him with themes to use?). The rather wild finale also sounds Russian, and Beethoven makes great use of tonal instability, repeatedly using C major instead of the home key of E minor.

The third quartet starts with a sombre introduction whose musical material bears no relation to the following brilliant *Allegro*. The slow movement's sparse textures and stark melodies have inspired some to suggest the Russian landscape. The charming third movement, very much a minuet rather than a scherzo, also provides the material for the semi-rigorous fugue of the last movement.

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