It has been easy for some to overlook the six quartets of Beethoven’s op. 18, composed during the years 1798–1800, especially in light of his astonishing expansion of string quartet form over the course of his career. Some have been quick to point out the influence of Haydn and Mozart (influences the young Beethoven would readily have acknowledged), while others have found these works wanting because they do not approach – or even point the way toward – Beethoven’s later quartets. For many listeners, these early quartets remain – in Joseph Kerman’s elegant phrase – “a merely mortal, not a celestial, nourishment.”

Nevertheless, this first set of quartets offers many pleasures, including the stormy Fourth, the experimental Sixth, and the motivic concentration of the First. Among the op. 18 quartets, the Second – in G major – is easily the most good-natured: if Beethoven does not set out to be comic in this music, there are moments when he comes very close to that.

The courtly and graceful themes of the opening Allegro have drawn particular attention. Their regular phrase-lengths and the question-and-answer quality of some of the writing have suggested an extramusical discourse, and certain observers have gone so far as to hear in this movement an urbane and civilized conversation; every commentator feels obligated to mention that this quality has earned the music the nickname Komplimentierungsquartett (Compliments quartet) in Germany. Listeners should be warned not to search for a literal depiction of a conversation – that nickname refers more to the music’s gracious atmosphere. Given all this geniality, the recapitulation brings a nice bump when Beethoven combines his two themes and has the first try to sing over the suddenly fierce rhythms of the second.

The Adagio cantabile, in C major, seems similarly urbane: its themes are smooth and well proportioned, and the movement might promise blandness were it not for an unusual episode at the center that changes everything. The opening music slows and seems to conclude with a quiet cadence, but Beethoven then transforms that cadence-rhythm into a blistering (and completely unexpected) Allegro. This section dashes about breathlessly and then vanishes, all within the space of forty seconds, but now the opening material is greatly embellished when it returns. Evidence from Beethoven’s manuscripts suggests that this fast center section was a late addition to the movement.

The sparkling Scherzo is pleasing music: it gracefully tosses rhythmic bits between the four instruments, and its trio section demands virtuoso playing from the first violin. Beethoven himself referred to the Allegro molto quasi presto as “ausgeknopft”: “unbuttoned.” The main theme of this rondo–finale is in fact derived from a transition passage in the opening movement, and this movement is full of bright energy,
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relaxed spirits, and a sense of fun. Beethoven brings back some of the rhythms of the Scherzo, and once again there are concertante passages for the first violin in the energetic coda as this music hurtles to its close.

String Quartet No. 9 in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3 (Razumovsky)

Published
1808

Performance Time
31 minutes

The three string quartets of Beethoven's op. 59 – commissioned by Count Andreas Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna and an accomplished violinist – are brilliantly scored, adventurous harmonically, and conceived on a scale of grandeur previously unknown in quartet writing. The breadth of their conception led to their being called "symphony quartets," and it is no surprise that they met with little popular or critical success – no one had ever heard quartets like these before.

Completed in December 1806, the Quartet in C Major proved from the beginning the least problematic of the Razumovsky quartets. In an early review, the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung said of the three quartets of op. 59: "They are profoundly conceived and finely worked out, but are not intelligible to the general public – perhaps with the exception of the Third in C major, whose individuality, melodiousness, and harmonic strength must surely win over every educated music lover." Yet the Quartet in C Major presents listener and performer with problems all its own. It was composed at exactly the same time as Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, and both quartet and symphony open in an aural fog. The two works begin with a slow introduction that purposely obscures both harmony and rhythm – Beethoven cuts listeners adrift and leaves them struggling for some sense of direction. And then the Allegro of both works establishes a definite tonality and tempo. The spiritual father of both symphony and quartet was almost certainly Mozart's Dissonant Quartet of 1785.

In Beethoven's quartet, the first violin leaps out brightly with the opening theme of the Allegro vivace and proclaims the clear tonality of C major. The violin's first two notes announce an important pattern: that rise of a half-step will unify the entire first movement. The first violin has so concertante a part that this movement (in fact, the entire quartet) has something of the feel of a violin concerto. That virtuosic part, often in a very high register, dominates this sonata-form movement, while the other three voices are frequently relegated to the role of accompanists. The music arrives at a moment of stasis before one of Beethoven's shortest codas: the cello's half-step rises launch a rapid chromatic stringendo to the final cadence.

The Andante opens with a cello pizzicato marked forte, and the first violin outlines the brooding A-minor theme that will dominate the movement. A surprising feature of this movement is that its steady tread of six eighth-notes per measure continues almost throughout – but rather than becoming monotonous, this measured pace takes on a force of its own, particularly as it is reinforced by Beethoven's imaginative
and expressive use of cello pizzicato. A second theme – in C major – lightens the mood somewhat, but the tone of the Andante remains dark and restless. Once again, the first violin rises high above the other instruments, often in passages of an almost aching beauty.

In contrast to the intense Andante, the Menuetto can seem lightweight. Vincent d'Indy felt that it represented “a return to the style of 1796,” and it is true that the movement lacks the originality of the movements that surround it (it is also the final minuet movement in any Beethoven quartet). But if the music can seem lightweight, it agreeably lessens the tension between the powerful movements on either side of it, and Beethoven makes piquant contrast between the flowing legato of the minuet and the sharply-articulated staccato of its trio. Rather than conclude with a simple da capo, Beethoven writes out a coda that leads without pause to the final movement.

That finale leaps to life with a brilliant fugue introduced by the viola. This movement has been called a fugue, but that is inaccurate: only its beginning is fugal – the remainder is in sonata form. The most impressive aspect of this movement is its relentless energy – it is virtually a perpetual motion for four virtuoso players. One of its most memorable sequences occurs in the development, where each of the instruments is in turn given a brilliant eight-measure passage (based on the final measure of the fugue theme) that simply goes up and comes down the scale. But Beethoven specifies that each instrument must remain on one string, and the result is a brief but dazzling cadenza for each instrument as the others accompany. It is gloriously apt quartet writing, and the effect in performance is breathtaking. There are few finales in Beethoven – or anywhere else – full of such headlong energy, and the music finally hurtles to a cadence. But it is a false cadence, as if Beethoven is unwilling to quit too soon. The music tentatively resumes, then speeds ahead and – set off by a lovely countertheme in the second violin – races to the end of one of Beethoven’s most exciting finales.

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

Premiere
March 1828

Performance Time
25 minutes

This quartet – Beethoven’s last complete composition – comes from the fall of 1826, one of the blackest moments in his life. During the previous two years, he had written three string quartets on commission from Prince Nikolas Galitzin, and another – Quartet no. 14 in C-sharp Minor, op. 131 – composed between January and June 1826. Even then, Beethoven was not done with the possibilities of the string quartet: he pressed on with yet another, making sketches for the Quartet in F Major during the summer of 1826.

At that point his world collapsed. His twenty-year-old nephew Karl, who had become Beethoven’s ward after a bitter court fight with the boy’s mother, attempted suicide on July 30. The composer was shattered – friends reported that he suddenly looked seventy years old. At the end of September, when the young man had recovered enough to travel, Beethoven took him – and the sketches for the new quartet – to
the country home of Beethoven’s brother Johann in Gneixendorf, a village about thirty miles west of Vienna. There, as he nursed Karl back to health, Beethoven’s own health began to fail. He would get up and compose at dawn, spend his days walking through the fields, and then resume composing in the evening. In Gneixendorf, he completed the Quartet in F Major in October and wrote a new finale to his earlier Quartet no. 13 in B-flat Major, op. 130. These were his final works. When Beethoven returned to Vienna in December, he went almost immediately to bed and died the following March.

One would expect music composed under such turbulent circumstances to be anguished, but the Quartet in F Major is radiant music, full of sunlight – it is as if Beethoven achieved in this quartet the peace unavailable to him in life. This is the shortest of the late quartets, and while this music remains very much in Beethoven’s late style, it returns to the classical proportions (and mood) of the Haydn quartets.

The opening movement, significantly marked Allegretto rather than the expected Allegro, is the one most often cited as Haydnesque. It is in sonata form – though a sonata form without overt conflict – and Beethoven builds it on brief thematic fragments rather than long melodies. This is poised, relaxed music, and the final cadence – on the falling figure that has run throughout the movement – is remarkable for its understatement. By contrast, the Vivace bristles with energy. Its outer sections rocket along on a sharply-syncopated main idea, while the vigorous trio sends the first violin sailing high above the other voices. The very ending is impressive: the music grows quiet, comes to a moment of stasis, and then Beethoven wrenches it to a stop with a sudden, stinging surprise.

The slow movement – Beethoven marks it Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo – is built on the first violin’s heartfelt opening melody. This opening is in D-flat major, but for the central episode Beethoven slows down even further (the marking is Più lento), moves to C-sharp minor, and writes music of a prayer-like simplicity. This section, full of halting rhythms, spans only ten measures before the return of the opening material, now elaborately decorated. The final movement has occasioned the most comment. In the manuscript, Beethoven noted two three-note mottos at its beginning under the heading Der schwer gefasste Entschluss: “The difficult resolution.” The first, solemnly intoned by viola and cello, asks the question: “Muss es sein?” (Must it be?). The violins’ inverted answer, which comes at the Allegro, is set to the words “Es muss sein!” (It must be!). Coupled with the fact that this quartet is virtually Beethoven’s final composition, these mottos have given rise to a great deal of pretentious nonsense from certain commentators, mainly to the effect that they must represent Beethoven’s last thoughts, a stirring philosophical affirmation of life’s possibilities. The actual origins of this motto are a great deal less imposing, for they arose from a dispute over an unpaid bill, and as a private joke for friends Beethoven wrote a humorous canon on the dispute, the theme of which he later adapted for this quartet movement. In any case, the mottos furnish the opening material for what turns out to be a powerful but essentially cheerful movement – the second theme radiates a childlike simplicity. The coda, which begins pizzicato, gradually gives way to bowed notes and a cadence on the “Es muss sein!” motto.

— Eric Bromberger