

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION

AUTUMN SEASON 2020 – BEETHOVEN 250



VANBRUGH QUARTET

CONCERT PROGRAMME



THE NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION

The National String Quartet Foundation is a legacy of the work of the Vanbrugh Quartet. Resident Quartet to RTE from 1986 to 2013 and Artists in Residence at University College, Cork from 1990 until the retirement of violinist Gregory Ellis in 2017, the Vanbrugh Quartet gave nearly two thousand concerts throughout Ireland as well as enjoying a successful international career.



The Foundation creates and sponsors projects which bring live chamber music to audiences throughout Ireland. It is committed to supporting musicians who wish to explore and perform the string quartet repertoire and to helping concert promoters present this rich and rewarding music.

In addition to the support of its major funders, the Arts Council and RTE, the Foundation gratefully acknowledges the support of University College, Cork, Cork City Council and Cork County Council. The Beethoven 250 project is also supported by the Goethe-Institut Irland.



Comhairle Cathrach Chorcaí
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THE VANBRUGH QUARTET

Keith Pascoe, violin
Elizabeth Charleson, violin
Simon Aspell, viola
Christopher Marwood, cello

The Vanbrugh Quartet was based in Cork from 1986 to 2017 and over its three decades the group gave close to three thousand concerts, presenting the chamber music repertoire to audiences throughout Ireland, Europe, the Americas and the Far East. Commercial recordings include more than thirty CDs of repertoire ranging from the complete Beethoven quartets to many contemporary Irish works. In 2016 the group was presented with the National Concert Hall's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of their contribution to music in Ireland.

The members of the Vanbrugh Quartet were also creators of the National String Quartet Foundation which promotes the work of Irish musicians and creates and supports live chamber music events at venues throughout Ireland. As part of the Foundation's series of concerts in autumn 2020 celebrating the music of Beethoven on the 250th anniversary of his birth, members of the Vanbrugh Quartet come together once more to help mark this unique occasion.

Programme notes

Beethoven's String Quartets have been described as 'setting this form of music-making at the pinnacle of Western art'. Nowhere else did the composer 'dramatise his life-long struggle with his music so starkly, or reveal his innermost being more completely'. The US composer and violinist Elaine Fine maintains the 'Beethoven Quartets are to string players what the *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Old Testament) is to theologians - a complete source of study and wonder. Each one is like a complicated person who becomes an intimate friend'.

The sixteen quartets fall into what has been termed Beethoven's early, middle and late periods. The six of the Op 18 set date from 1798 to 1800 when he was in his late 20s. The five quartets – Opp 59 Nos 1, 2, and 3 with 74 and 95 – were completed between 1806 and 1814 and although the autograph score of the Op 95 is dated 1810, it seems Beethoven made several revisions prior to its publication in 1814.

The last five quartets were written between 1824 and 1826, the closing years of the composer's life when his loss of hearing was complete and he was beset by other illnesses and family complications that affected him deeply. Even so, the music from this late period is not without its occasional jocular moments.

Musicologist Melvin Berger tells us 'that Beethoven extended and expanded the compositional practices he inherited from Haydn and Mozart by infusing them with new force and flexibility, providing a vastly increased scope, more emotional content and an imposing monumentality. He pushed classicism to its very limits, preparing the soil in which the seeds of 19th century Romanticism were to take root and flourish'.

Quartet No 4 in C minor Op 18 No 4

Allegro ma non tanto

Scherzo: Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto

Menuetto: Allegretto

Allegro

Despite designated as No 4, this Quartet is, most likely, the last of Beethoven's set of six Op 18 Quartets to be written. It is interesting that the composer did not leave any hint of a sketch or plan among his papers, which is something unusual for him. Maybe he hadn't to bother with preliminary drafts with his ideas coming in a continuous inspirational stream. But, it has been also suggested that the work was based on earlier material that Beethoven had written in Bonn pre 1793 and 'stockpiled' in his brain for use at some later time.

The fourth Op 18 Quartet is also the only one of the six not in a major key. It comes in C minor, a key usually reserved by the composer for something tense and dramatic of which his 5th Symphony is probably the prime example. There are elements of tension and emotional stress in this Quartet, especially in the opening movement that can be occasionally trenchant and impatient. Yet, even here, there are times when a wry smile can be detected in the musical discourse with the overall feeling of the Quartet conveying something less than a spirit of foreboding.

As it rises in a twisting fashion from its lower to its higher notes, the first violin delivers the anxious and darkly hued first theme over an agitated accompaniment into which Beethoven inserts a series of striking chords. After a while matters are calmed and, led by the second violin, we find the music has slipped into the related E flat second subject, which is derived from the latter half of the first theme.

Beethoven develops these ideas imaginatively with the tension heightened now and then through various modulations and where Beethoven's strong string writing has an orchestral depth from time to time. Unpredictable tremolo figures produced by the second violin and viola alert us to the approach of the recapitulation. The first theme appears a little more frenetic than before while the second, although now heard on the first violin, is more or less, unchanged. There is a climactic coda to bring the movement to its fortissimo close.

At this point in a classical quartet one would expect a serious, or possibly solemn, adagio but Beethoven has other plans. What comes next is a delightful, moderately paced and amusing scherzo-like movement. In C major, it has a delightfully capricious character with the composer unobtrusively demonstrating his contrapuntal capabilities perfectly.

He begins with a fugato subject played pianissimo by the second violin, followed by the viola then pursued by the first violin and with the cello forming the rearguard. The violins share the second theme while a third subject, introduced by the second violin, has falling and rising scale patterns. Each idea has a three-note repeated figure that moves around the ensemble in marvellously polyphonic designs, all seeming quite effortless in Beethoven's inventive canons and fugato-like figures.

What follows is allegedly a Minuet although not what one might expect from Haydn or Mozart. Having returned to C minor, this Minuet is a little uncertain about its role with its character somewhat unsettled. To an extent it recalls the opening Allegro with its irregular accents and emphatic sforzando markings. This is not a Minuet to which one might dance with elegant gestures.

The central Trio finds the second violin and viola trying to have a little serious conversation with the cello butting in with the odd comment. All the while the first violin offers a kind of deprecating commentary in 'running triplets'. Not unexpectedly the Minuet is repeated but with Beethoven demanding that its original Allegretto marking be accelerated to Più allegro, giving the impression that this Minuet may well be another Scherzo after all. Whichever it may be, it still makes for delightful music making.

The first violin dominates the principal theme of the rondo Finale that owes something to the concluding movements of many of Haydn's string quartets. There is also a mildly raucous touch in the music with a Turkish twist to it, something popular in Vienna at the time. Given to the second violin, the next subject is far more lyrical while a third idea recalls a sense of the urgency felt in the first theme.

But this is basically a humorous movement not least when a triplet sequence rises from the cello and wings its way through the ensemble. These triplets return in the final bars but before that there is a fairly lengthy coda with Beethoven insisting his principal theme be played as quickly as possible. What was originally a lively Allegro has become an exuberant Prestissimo.

Beethoven dedicated his Op 18 Quartets to his patron and admirer Prince Joseph Franz Lobkowitz (1772-1816). Pleased with the result, he endowed Beethoven with an annual stipend. The Quartets were premiered at the Prince's palace in Vienna by a group of young players led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830), who would become synonymous with Beethoven's quartets over the ensuing years.

Because of his corpulent figure, the composer liked to call the violinist *Falstaff* and wrote a short and amusing, if not particularly complimentary, choral piece WoO 100 about him in 1801. Entitled *Lob auf den Dicken* (In Praise of the Fat One), the first line is *Schuppanzigh ist ein Lump* (Schuppanzigh is a rogue).

Quartet No 16 in F major Op 135

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Der schwer gefasste Entschluss

(Grave: "Muss es sein", Allegro: "Es muss sein!")

This, the last of Beethoven's sixteen string quartets, is thought to reveal his serene acceptance of the inevitability of death. This idea comes from one of Beethoven's letters to his publisher Moritz Schlesinger. 'Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But, as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason I have written the motto *The Difficult Decision - Must it be, it must be!*'

Now, while Beethoven wrote this to Schlesinger, *Must it be?* is also thought to have had its origins in an amusing episode. A certain Ignaz Dembscher, a government official and a wealthy enough fellow at whose house a number of Beethoven's quartets had been played, had failed to tender fifty florins for the use of the score of the Op 130 quartet. The composer, not pleased, refused to loan the parts for a further performance.

Dembscher, anxious to maintain amicable relations with the composer, turned to Beethoven's close friend Karl Holz (1798-1868) to find a way around the problem. When Holz suggested paying the fifty florins, Dembscher is said to have replied *Must it be?* On hearing this, the delighted Beethoven is believed to have written down the words and music of a little canon - *It must be. It must be. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Across with the wallet! Across! Across! It must be.* Beethoven kept the motif in his head.

This last quartet is quite different from its immediate predecessors. Short, it has a kind of spartan sparseness. Brevity is secured by concentration. Rests are frequent; climaxes brief. The essential ideas might even be in shorthand. The work was written between August and October 1826 and premièred in Vienna on 23rd March 1828, almost a year after the composer's death.

The first idea of the *Allegretto* has five separate motifs, each with its own inflection and character. It moves from one instrument to another as if in conversational discourse. The second idea comes by pitting an ascending staccato against a descending frolicsome run. Beethoven develops his material brilliantly with what maybe a mathematical ingenuity of criss-crossing note patterns between the ensemble members. The various motifs are presented in intriguing new guises and combinations. There is a short recapitulation and a very condensed coda.

The *Vivace*, naturally swift, furnishes as a scherzo. It is propelled forward by its pointed syncopation and cross accents. Its theme, which has a positive frugality, is difficult to define but it begins on a heavy beat and ends on a light one. Rhythm is the all-important ingredient.

The middle, or trio, section, which continues the frantic pace, comes in a rising scale on viola and cello with a repeated note accompaniment. It has the drone of a bagpipe and gives the violin dancing figures across its strings while the others doggedly repeat an ostinato figure some forty-seven times. The movement dies down gradually but ends on a forte chord.

The slow movement has an earnest gravity. Beethoven called it *Susser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang* (Sweet song of rest or peace) to which he gives a step-wise melody. This develops into what may be described as four variations played without pause and with a touching violin obbligato at one point. The music hardly rises above a piano dynamic and institutes an atmosphere of satisfying repose. The movement has innate nobility.

The viola and cello pose the question *Must it be?* while the violins give the affirmative answer. These come after a short *Grave ma non troppo tratto* and this pattern is repeated during the movement. Almost since its première, commentators have discussed this Finale at length. The music certainly looks beyond the whole classical scheme of harmonically based polyphony in some of its unresolved dissonance. But there is lightness and even humour in the music although this may be provocative and cryptic. But the outcome is one of positive confidence, which after all the questioning seems to say *I told you! I told you! I told you so!*

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