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BEETHOVEN

String Quartets (Complete)

Vol. 1

Op. 18, Nos. 1 and 2

Kodály Quartet



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

String Quartets Vol. 1

String Quartet in F major, Op. 18, No. 1

String Quartet in G major, Op. 18, No. 2

In 1792 Beethoven left his native city of Bonn to seek his fortune in the imperial capital, Vienna. Five years earlier his patron, the Archbishop of Cologne, a scion of the imperial family, had sent him to Vienna, where he had hoped to have lessons with Mozart. His plans were frustrated by the illness and subsequent death of his mother, which made it necessary to return to Bonn and before long to take charge of the welfare of his younger brothers. Beethoven's father, overshadowed by the eminence of his own father, Kapellmeister to a former Archbishop, had proved inadequate both as a musician and in the family, of which his son now took control.

As a boy Beethoven had been trained to continue family tradition as a musician and had followed his father and grandfather as a member of the archiepiscopal musical establishment. In 1792 he arrived in Vienna with introductions to various members of the nobility and with the offer of lessons with Haydn, from whom he later claimed to have learned nothing. There were further lessons from the Court Composer, Antonio Salieri, and from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, and an initial career of some brilliance as a keyboard virtuoso. He was to establish himself, in the course of time, as a figure of remarkable genius and originality and as a social eccentric, no respecter of persons, his eccentricity all the greater for his increasing deafness. This last disability made public performance, whether as a keyboard-player or in the direction of his own music, increasingly difficult, and must have served to encourage the development of one particular facet of his music, stigmatised by hostile contemporary critics as "learned", the use of counterpoint. He died in Vienna in 1827.

In his sixteen string quartets, the first set of six published in 1801 and the last, completed in 1826 and published in the year of the composer's death, Beethoven was as innovative as ever, developing and extending a form that seemed to have already reached a height of perfection in the later work of Haydn and of Mozart. The earliest mention of a string quartet comes in the recorded request of Count Apponyi in 1795. This had no immediate result, but it seems probable that Beethoven in these years was influenced by Emanuel Aloys Förster, a musician 22 years his senior, whose proficiency as a teacher of counterpoint he admired and recommended to others, while himself perhaps profiting from the example of Förster's own quartets. The first group of string quartets by Beethoven, published as Opus 18, consisted of quartets written between 1798 and 1800 and was dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz. The third of these, in D major, was the first in order of composition, followed by what was issued as Opus 18, No. 1, the Quartet in F major. This last was completed in its original version by 25th June 1799, the date of an inscription by the composer on the first violin part, addressed to his close friend Karl Amenda, who had taken up residence in Vienna in 1798, serving first Prince Lobkowitz and then as music-teacher in the Mozart family. The friendship of Beethoven and Amenda had started at a quartet evening in a friend's house, when the composer turned the pages for Amenda, playing first violin. In 1799 Amenda was obliged to return home to Courland after the death of his brother. Beethoven's note to his friend reads: Accept this quartet as a small token of our friendship. Whenever you play it to yourself, remember the days we have spent together and at the same time the sincere affection I felt and will always feel for you, your warm-hearted and true friend. In a letter to Amenda of 1st July 1801 he warns him not to lend the quartet to anyone, since he has made various changes in it.

The F major Quartet opens with an exciting first movement in which the opening figure, announced by all four instruments, assumes dramatic importance in the central development section. Beethoven is reported to have played the D minor slow movement on the pianoforte to Amenda, who heard in it the parting of two lovers, an image that the composer approved, telling his

friend that he had had in mind the scene in the burial vault in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Scherzo and Trio make a lively contrast, after the sustained beauty, tinged with tragedy, of the Adagio, while the finale explores contrapuntal possibilities, a considerable movement that significantly extends the technical potential of the form.

The second quartet of the Opus 18 set, the Quartet in G major, is a less demanding work, for players and listeners. It has a first movement very much in the style of later Haydn, a movement that has won the work the nickname the *Komplimentierquartett*, a reference to its graceful formality. The C major slow movement is in the mood of a contemplative hymn, until the unexpected intrusion of an F major Allegro, its rhythm hinted in a short figure in the coda of the first section of the movement. The C major Adagio returns, to be followed by the true Scherzo in G major, framing a contrasting C major Trio, a movement that conforms with the expectations aroused by the first movement. The quartet ends with a rapid final movement, opened by the cello, with a subject that re-appears in the central development briefly in less usual keys, before the concluding recapitulation.

Kodály Quartet

The members of the Kodály Quartet were trained at the Budapest Ferenc Liszt Academy, and three of them, the second violin Tamás Szabo, viola-player Gábor Fias and cellist János Devich, were formerly in the Sebestyén Quartet, which was awarded the jury's special diploma at the 1966 Geneva International Quartet Competition and won first prize at the 1968 Leo Weiner Quartet Competition in Budapest. Since 1970, with the violinist Attila Falvai, the quartet has been known as the Kodály Quartet, a title adopted with the approval of the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education. The Kodály Quartet has given concerts throughout Europe, in the Soviet Union and in Japan, in addition to regular appearances in Hungary both in the concert hall and on television and has made for Naxos highly acclaimed recordings of string quartets by Ravel, Debussy, Haydn and Schubert.

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NAXOS



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STEREO

BEETHOVEN

String Quartets (Complete) Vol. 1

Op. 18, Nos. 1 and 2

DDD

Playing
Time :
55'33"

Kodály Quartet

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Allegro con brio | (10:20) |
| 2 | Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato | (10:33) |
| 3 | Scherzo: Allegro molto | (3:39) |
| 4 | Allegro | (5:54) |

String Quartet in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--------|
| 5 | Allegro | (7:56) |
| 6 | Adagio cantabile | (6:33) |
| 7 | Scherzo: Allegro | (4:46) |
| 8 | Allegro molto quasi presto | (5:28) |

Recorded at the Unitarian Church in Budapest from 22nd to 25th October, 1991.

Producer: Ibolya Tóth

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Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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