HEATH QUARTET
Heath@Home: Encore Performances from the quartet’s 2019–2020 Beethoven String Quartet Cycle
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HEATH QUARTET
Oliver Heath, Violin
Sara Wolstenholme, Violin
Gary Pomeroy, Viola
Christopher Murray, Cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

“Heath at Home” Encore Performance Live Stream
Saturday, May 2, 2020

Quartet no. 1 in F Major, op. 18, no. 1 (1799)
   Allegro con brio
   Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato
   Scherzo: Allegro molto
   Allegro

“Intermission”

“Heath at Home” Encore Performance Live Stream
Friday, May 8, 2020

Quartet no. 11 in F Minor, op. 95, Serioso (1810)
   Allegro con brio
   Allegretto ma non troppo
   Allegro assai vivace ma serioso
   Larghetto espressivo – Allegro agitato

Both works originally recorded October 5, 2019 • MAC, Robison Hall

Patrons are requested to stay at home and participate in the online discussion.
The F Major Quartet, published as op. 18, no. 1, underwent a comprehensive revision by which it became in many ways the strongest work of the set. Beethoven sent its first version to his friend Carl Amenda, but two years later wrote to him “Don’t let anyone see your quartet as I have greatly changed it, as only now do I know how to write quartets properly.” It was a root-and-branch revision, a magnificent lesson in composition to any student (both versions can be found together in Section VI, Volume 3 of the Beethoven Edition published by Henle). The result was a work of considerable power in which the composer showed not only his mastery of structural subtlety but also a new grasp of quartet texture. Such lessons are evident in every moment.

The first movement is one of the most succinct and muscular statements in early Beethoven, and the first figure generates a remarkable range of growth. The directness and simplicity of its beginning did not come all at once; the sketches show that it had to be hammered out, and the way its terseness serves to make room for later expansion foreshadows the extraordinary achievement of op. 95. Notice how the little turning figure in the first theme is soon overlaid by a new counterpoint and then, as the music moves to the dominant, the second group floats and expands (with gentle syncopations) in a way we might not have supposed possible in a piece with so crisp a start. In the revision the development was drastically altered in its range of modulation and the
perfection of its part-writing—of all the opus 18 quartets, this shows most democracy between the instruments.

Beethoven told Amenda that when composing the slow movement, he had *Romeo and Juliet* in mind. He more than once responded to the promptings of Shakespeare but, as with the *Pastoral* Symphony, would have insisted that the result was ‘more an expression of feeling than painting.’ This passionate D minor movement has something in common with the ‘Largo e mesto’ of the piano sonata in D, op. 10, no. 3. Both spaciously express a sense of tragedy beyond the ken of any of Beethoven’s predecessors except Gluck, and the quartet movement has a new refinement of sound, partly due to the way in which the composer removed many of the more vehement markings of the first version. The fining down of the dynamics makes all the more striking the intense outburst towards the end.

After this the Scherzo, far from being the usual release of energy after the restraints of a slow movement—is almost soothing. This is another sign of maturity—a quality we must never underestimate in Beethoven’s early masterpieces. Too often his opus 18 quartets are patronizingly treated as the promising products of a student of genius, and we must not forget that already Beethoven is active in a territory unpredictable even by Haydn and Mozart. When these works were first heard the impression was of disconcerting but dazzling mastery of novel ideas. By the time this F major quartet appeared, audiences were prepared for a fiercely aggressive Beethoven scherzo, so the quiet nature of this one provided a new kind of surprise, not contradicted by the abrupt humor of the modulating trio with its skipping octaves. In this Scherzo there is, as Basil Lam says, an element of “unrest that links it with the first half of the Quartet”—but it is also an easement towards the rondo Finale.

When he revised it, Beethoven changed the marking for the finale from ‘Allegretto’ to ‘Allegro’. This means that he first thought of a not excessive speed, but may have felt that ‘Allegretto’ suggested too slow a pace. The ‘Allegro’ marking does not really mean ‘very fast’ (we have to remember that the literal meaning of the word is ‘cheerful’ or ‘lively’—not quick) and there is great risk to the detail if the piece is rushed; its rhythmic vitality is the stronger
for not being hurried. The quicksilver first subject is contrasted with singing elements that give the piece great spaciousness, and in this respect, it balances the first movement. The development shows Beethoven’s already great mastery of polyphony, a skill for which he has not always been given the credit. To the academic, smoothness used to be the only acceptable attribute of good counterpoint.

Quartet no. 11 in F Minor, op. 95, Serioso

Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace ma serioso
Larghetto espressivo – Allegro agitato

1810 was not one of Beethoven’s most prolific years, but it did produce this remarkably concentrated quartet—dedicated to one his first friends in Vienna, Count Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz—and the music for Goethe’s Egmont. Is there a connection between the two works? The Egmont Overture and the quartet have the key of F minor in common, and both have deliberately dissociative endings in the major, with new, quicker tempi. In the Overture, the intention is to depict the blaring fanfare ordered by Alva to drown Egmont’s speech on the scaffold, an intention it defeats by itself being inspiring.

Could the quartet have anything to do with the private as opposed to the public aspects of such a situation? Egmont’s inner thoughts? Could the quartet have anything to do with the private as opposed to the public aspects of such a situation? Egmont’s inner thoughts? If so, the lithe and delicate F major coda to the finale could be apt enough for a fleeting sense of justification and release at the point of death, while the dissociative nature of the music itself, all new material, might have had some additional extra-musical
motivation—though it is profoundly convincing in itself. There is no doubt that Beethoven was absorbed by Goethe’s *Egmont* at the time, so the idea of a link with this quartet may not be too fanciful.

Beethoven called op. 95 *Quartetto serioso*—a curious step to take when so many of his works could scarcely be said to lack seriousness, and the fact that he showed some reluctance to let the work be published suggests it held for him some special significance at which we can only guess. It is one of the most compact of all his works and his shortest quartet; yet it has an astonishing variety and scope both of character and material, achieved through a power of suggestion that contrives to create space where there seems not enough to contain all these things. The amazingly terse opening has a rhythmic subtlety that causes its answer on the flat supertonic (a semitone higher) suddenly to withdraw—the mysterious harmonies that follow already create a sense of space, and when Beethoven comes to the second theme he is able to allow it to expand, almost with leisure, without the slightest suggestion of diffuseness. This is composition of the very greatest order. The first movement is unusually short but gives the impression of incalculable dimensions and limitless power.

The remarkable Allegretto is in the remote key of D major and contains two main elements—a cantabile main theme and a second subject treated as a highly individual and expressive fugato. Deeply disturbed polyphony dominates the heart of the movement, and during this time there is a passage of astounding non-contrapuntal modulations, followed by another fugato where the theme gets shorter and shorter, losing notes from the tail backwards—a phenomenon probably unique in classical music. This passage, seeming to lose its subject, prepares the way for the return of the first theme. But the fugato theme is not altogether lost—it reappears later in the lower parts, rising briefly to the surface as part of the melodic flow of the ‘main’ theme before vanishing again. The end is inconclusive, and the scherzo breaks abruptly.

Beethoven does not call it a scherzo. He used this term only literally, when humor or wit was intended. There is no humor in this fierce piece, nor in the wonderful trio, unlike anything else in quartet literature and also unique in occurring twice in different forms, the second time with even more marvelous
modulations than before. The final statement of the blunt scherzo is sharply truncated and sped up.

The finale opens with a short but deeply elegiac introduction, leading to a movement of extraordinary tortuous grace—a dance of despair, some might think, anticipating in some ways the last movement of the late A minor quartet. But despair is not an element in Beethoven’s art. Profoundly disturbing as he can be, he cannot express mere depression, for the human energy of his work is irrepressible, breaking through the most terrible agonies of his life and prodigious creative efforts. This is one of the works where he achieves the apparent impossibility of totally convincing dissociation—in this case in the gloriously fleet and elated F major coda. What does it mean? We have already thought of a possible extra-musical explanation, but it doesn’t have to ‘mean’ anything except the miracle it performs. The other great works in which dissociation is a positive and paradoxically unifying force—on a much greater scale—are the last piano Sonata in C minor, op. 111, and the late B-flat Quartet, op. 130. The F minor quartet and the Egmont Overture are the first notable examples of this phenomenon, of which Beethoven was the first and perhaps the only master.

All Beethoven program notes by Robert Simpson (1921–1997), English composer, BBC producer, and broadcaster.
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The charismatic and sought-after Heath Quartet won the 2016 Gramophone Chamber Award for their recording of the complete string quartets of Sir Michael Tippett, and in May 2013 became the first ensemble in 15 years to win the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society’s Young Artists Award. Formed in 2002 at the Royal Northern College of Music they were selected for representation by Young Classical Artists Trust, awarded a Borletti-Buitoni Special Ensemble Scholarship, and in 2012 won the Ensemble Prize at the Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern where they are now regular visitors.

Following their award-winning debut recording of Tippett on the Wigmore LIVE label, the quartet recorded two discs for the Harmonia Mundi/PIAS label featuring Tchaikovsky’s first and third quartets (November 2016) and the complete Bartók quartets (June 2017), the latter being shortlisted for the 2018 Gramophone Chamber Award and the winner of the 2017 Limelight Chamber Recording of the Year award.

During the 2019-2020 season, the quartet will perform a complete Beethoven quartet cycle over the course of three return visits to Middlebury College in Vermont as part of an ongoing residency. Beethoven also features in their debut at
the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, returns to Wigmore Hall and Handelsbeurs Ghent, as well as in various appearances throughout the UK. The music of the Second Viennese School is also high on their agenda this season, with works by Berg, Webern, and Schoenberg appearing on their forthcoming recording program. Longtime artistic collaborator Carolyn Sampson (soprano) joins them on the recording, as well as in recital for their debut at Palau de la Musica Catalana in Barcelona.

Last season included the quartet’s Saffron Hall and Cheltenham Festival debuts as well as returns to Boulez Saal Berlin, Wigmore Hall, and Aldeburgh Festival. They also made appearances at several European Festivals including Mecklenberg Vorpommern in Germany, Westport in Ireland, and Norfolk & Norwich in the UK, among others.

Notable performances of previous seasons have included the world premiere of a John Tavener piece at the BBC Proms, concerts at the Beethovenfest Bonn, their debuts at the Musée d’Orsay and Louvre Auditorium in Paris, and the World Premiere of Dobrinka Tabakova’s *Highland Pastorale*, performed at their Cheltenham Festival debut. In 2018, they made their debut tour of New Zealand. In the UK, they have also performed at the Barbican, Bridgewater Hall, Sage Gateshead, Perth Concert Hall, and Queen’s Hall Edinburgh. And in Europe they have appeared at the Kissingen Winterzauber and Schwetzinger Festivals as well as Concertgebouw Amsterdam, deSingel Arts Centre in Antwerp, Vara Konserthus in Sweden, Esterházy Palace, and the Musikverein and the Konzerthaus in Berlin and Vienna.

Strong exponents of contemporary music, the quartet has also worked with several leading composers including Hans Abrahamsen, Helen Grimes, Louis Andriessen, Brett Dean, Anthony Gilbert, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steven Mackey, and John Musto. They took part in the European première of Steve Mackey’s *Gaggle and Flock* for string octet, the world première of John Musto’s *Another Place* with Carolyn Sampson at the Wigmore Hall as well as receiving unanimous critical acclaim for their performance of Ligeti’s Quartet No. 2, and Thomas Ades’ *Arcadiana* for The Park Lane Group at the Purcell Room. In 2018, they embarked on a special project with Spanish director Calixto Bieto, in a co-production between the Birmingham
Repertory Theatre and Holland Festival with performances throughout Europe. A revival of the project will be taken to Festival l’Automne Paris in October 2019.

The Heath Quartet regularly enjoys working with a host of talented collaborators who also include Anna Caterina Antonacci, James Baillieu, Ian Bostridge, Adrian Brendel, Michael Collins, Colin Currie, Stephen Hough, Sunwook Kim, Richard Lester, Joanna MacGregor, Aleksandar Madzar, Anthony Marwood, Mark Padmore, Lawrence Power, Jamie Walton, and the Tokyo Quartet, and have even ventured into the world of jazz in a ‘Wigmore Late’ concert together with saxophonist Trish Clowes and pianist Gwilym Simcock.

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Our deepest thanks to the Heath Quartet for collaborating with us to share these archival performances with you.

We wish you and yours continued health and safety and eagerly await the time we can all enjoy live performances together again.

Pg. 3: Portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1820; Pg. 5: Portrait of Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, no credit; Pg. 8: Photo of the Heath Quartet, Kaupo Kikkas.
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