

# Introduction

The seventeen Beethoven string quartets are to chamber music what the plays of Shakespeare are to drama and what the self-portraits of Rembrandt are to portraiture. Our relationship with these masterworks can benefit from a companion—a *vade mecum* (“go with me”), as such books used to be known—for the nonspecialist, offering perspective and guidance. Such a companion should enhance the experience of listening to the quartets in live performance or on recordings. It should also enrich our understanding of the context and significance of the quartets as cultural objects.

These dual purposes—enhancing the listening experience and enriching our understanding of the cultural context—are reflected in the approach we have taken to assembling this companion. To serve the first, we asked Michael Steinberg, formerly critic of the *Boston Globe* and more recently Artistic Advisor of the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra, to write individual essays on each of the quartets. These essays, grouped into three chapters that make up the second part of this book, succeed admirably, we believe, in providing movement-by-movement guideposts for the listener. Steinberg has also contributed a glossary of musical terms that is helpful not only for his essay but for those of the other contributors as well.

The motivating concern connected with the second purpose of our companion was with the society and culture of Beethoven’s time and, to some extent, the context in which the quartets are performed today. We asked for contributions from writers whom we trusted to be both original and accessible, without concern for comprehensiveness or consistency among essays. We favored interdisciplinary perspectives that reflect

the diversity of approaches characteristic of the last twenty years. There is no particular order in which these essays should be read; we hope each reader will find something of interest to begin with and that the threads of connection will lead to the other essays.

Joseph Kerman's essay, "Beethoven Quartet Audiences: Actual, Potential, Ideal," examines in detail one aspect of the reception history of the quartets: to what changing audiences did Beethoven address these works? This apparently simple question opens complex and fascinating issues. For example, Kerman develops a connection between the art-historical notion of "absorption," developed by Michael Fried in connection with certain eighteenth-century painters ("the supreme fiction of the beholder's nonexistence"), and the fact that in certain of Beethoven's late quartets "the sense of audience superfluity is almost palpable."

Robert Winter's essay, "Performing the Beethoven Quartets in Their First Century," brings together information on how and under what circumstances the quartets were performed before the era of sound recordings. We learn of the extent of French influence on those who first performed the quartets and of their mix of partly modern, partly old-fashioned instruments. Through the eyes of three popular nineteenth-century German and American music periodicals, Winter examines the often surprising manner in which the nineteenth century viewed and consumed the quartets. For example, until well after mid-century, string quartet ensembles consisted most frequently of either family groupings or of the principal players from permanent orchestras who came together for a handful of concerts each year.

Maynard Solomon opens his essay by pointing out that nineteenth-century musicians and critics viewed Beethoven as the originator of the romantic movement in music; indeed he was lifted to mystical status as a romantic paradigm. Beginning with the work of the German scholar Arnold Schmitz in the 1920s and culminating in the influential work of Charles Rosen in the 1970s and 1980s, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction, transforming Beethoven into the archetypal classicist. The question, Solomon argues, is not simply how Beethoven should be viewed by historians of culture but how his music is to be heard: the issue "has an important bearing on whether we perceive and perform works such as the quartets primarily as outgrowths of eighteenth-century traditions and performance practices or as auguries of fresh traditions in the process of formation."

Leon Botstein—social historian, conductor, and college president—

has contributed a wide-ranging essay that places the quartets in the context of Viennese society, philosophy, theater, and literature. Connections to other essays in this volume emerge at every turn; there is discussion of the context of the earliest performances (Winter), of the special relationship of audience to chamber music performance (Kerman), of the reception of the quartets and views as to their “place” within the musical scene (Solomon); there is even discussion, in connection with the twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, of expression and meaning in the quartets that intersects with Robert Martin’s discussion of performance and interpretation.

Drawing on his experience as cellist of the Sequoia String Quartet, Robert Martin looks at the quartets from the perspective of the performer, asking what sorts of interpretive decisions are made and on what basis. Martin takes advantage of the circumstance that in chamber music, rather more than in solo or orchestral playing, players are led to verbalize their reasons for musical decisions in order to persuade their colleagues. Martin asks about the relationship between performers, composer, and score; he examines a literalist, a “buried treasure,” and a textual interpretation of this relationship before settling on what he calls a collaborative view.

As a young man Beethoven inherited the highly developed quartet models of Haydn and Mozart. They had devoted many of their finest efforts to string quartet writing, for reasons that went to the heart of the Viennese style. Viennese musicians viewed the members of the violin family as the most subtle of the crafted instruments, capable of challenging the human voice in their powers of expression. String trios were considered less than ideal because only by using multiple stops or through acoustical deception could they replicate four-part chords—the most complex in the Viennese musical vocabulary. The string quintet, mastered especially and unforgettably by Mozart, tilted the intimate balance of voices toward orchestral textures. The string quartet was seen as perfect both expressively and texturally, intimate yet complete. The four performers exemplified the Viennese ideal of civilized discourse, in which one could follow the separate voices with relative ease—more so, for example, than in a string quintet.

To be sure, Beethoven experimented first in Vienna with string trios, a genre in which he was less likely to be compared to Haydn and Mozart. Within a few years he was drawn into a full set of six quartets

(Op. 18) that displayed both their debt to Haydn and Mozart and their originality. However we deal with the issue of Beethoven's "style periods" (addressed in this volume by both Joseph Kerman and Maynard Solomon), the seventeen quartets are in many ways a surer guide to the debate than the sonatas (often used by Beethoven as a proving ground) or the symphonies (whose public character imposed more stylistic limits than chamber music).

String quartet writing was deeply important to Beethoven throughout his career, as we know from many letters, documents, contemporary reviews, eyewitness accounts, and, of course, the music itself. But his return to the medium in the very last years and months of his life testifies movingly to the centrality of the string quartet in his musical and personal identity. Having completed the two largest public works of his career—the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa solennis*—and having received from the May 1824 premieres critical adulation of the kind that had slackened during the previous decade, Beethoven might have been expected to continue in the public spotlight. He had an almost standing invitation to go to England. There were numerous opera projects to be considered. And we know that in 1822, 1824, and 1825 he made tentative sketches for a "tenth" symphony.

But Beethoven came home to quartet writing, though it offered little potential for income and even less for public acclaim; only the first three of the five late quartets were commissioned, and the money from that commission never materialized. We get some sense of the scope of his preoccupation from the fact that, in 1826, Beethoven needed more than 650 pages of sketches to fashion the C-sharp minor Quartet, Op. 131—more than four times as many as he needed to write out the finished score in its entirety. Indeed, as Joseph Kerman suggests, Beethoven seems to have created these last quartets "without any listener in mind but himself."

Robert Winter & Robert Martin  
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