



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Early String Quartets

Narratio Quartet

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Johannes Leertouwer violin

Franc Polman violin

Dorothea Vogel viola

Viola de Hoog cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Six Quatuors pour deux Violons, Alto, et Violoncelle composées et dédiés A Son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince Regnant de Lobkowitz & par Louis van Beethoven

CD 1**String Quartet Op. 18, No. 3 in D major**

- | | |
|--------------------------|------|
| [1] I. Allegro | 8:14 |
| [2] II. Andante con moto | 7:47 |
| [3] III. Allegro | 3:10 |
| [4] IV. Presto | 7:35 |

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

- | | |
|---|-------|
| [5] I. Allegro con brio | 10:29 |
| [6] II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato | 8:59 |
| [7] III. Scherzo Allegro molto, Trio | 3:46 |
| [8] IV. Allegro | 7:20 |

Total time 57:24

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

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|--|------|
| [1] I. Allegro | 8:18 |
| [2] II. Adagio cantabile-Allegro-Tempo I | 5:47 |
| [3] III. Scherzo Allegro, Trio | 4:56 |
| [4] IV. Allegro molto, quasi Presto | 5:53 |

String Quartet Op. 18, No. 5 in A major

- | | |
|---|-------|
| [5] I. Allegro | 7:50 |
| [6] II. Menuetto, Trio | 5:20 |
| [7] III. Andante cantabile [con variazioni] | 11:05 |
| [8] IV. Allegro | 7:33 |

Total time 56:48

CD 3**String Quartet Op. 18, No. 4 in C minor**

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|--|------|
| [1] I. Allegro ma non tanto | 9:36 |
| [2] II. Andante scherzoso quasi Allegretto | 7:41 |
| [3] III. Menuetto Allegro, Trio | 3:46 |
| [4] IV. Allegretto-Prestissimo | 4:54 |

String Quartet Op. 18, No. 6 in B-flat major

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|--|------|
| [5] I. Allegro con brio | 7:03 |
| [6] II. Adagio ma non troppo | 6:32 |
| [7] III. Scherzo Allegro, Trio | 3:47 |
| [8] La Malinconia, Questo pezzo si deve trattare colla più gran delicatezza
Adagio-Allegretto quasi Allegro | 7:58 |

Total time 51:23

The order in which the quartets are presented on these three disks represents the order in which Beethoven composed the pieces, not the order in which they were first published.

2009-2024

15 years of the Narratio Quartet and Beethoven

I have often wondered which of the “great spirits” might provide a new impulse and a different direction for what we call classical music in this early part of the twenty-first century. Over the twenty years when I was a member of the Schönberg Quartet, we felt how much the Second Viennese School had “escaped” from the late Romantic era along new pathways in the early twentieth century, in order to present the only aspect of music that is really important – the expression of feeling – in a novel way.

I and my colleagues in the Narratio Quartet have been immersed in all of Beethoven’s string quartets for over fifteen years now and we have a similar feeling about them. We experience time and again how Beethoven explored and then overcame the limits of the Classical style and the instrumental difficulties that were prevalent at the start of the nineteenth century.

Beethoven’s string quartets were written in an era when chamber music was shifting from the salons of the nobility into the concert hall and when chamber music ensembles were slowly but surely metamorphosing from being a pursuit for a mix of outstanding amateurs and professionals into a discipline for professionally trained musicians. Thus the early Opus 18 quartets originated in that more relaxed eighteenth-century atmosphere. Reference is often made to a relationship with Haydn’s quartets, but we feel the revolutionary Beethoven is already very present in opus 18.

Now, of course, we are twenty-first-century musicians and you are a twenty-first-century audience. Beethoven and his quartets still keep us occupied. For us in the Narratio Quartet they could even be described as our *raison d’être*. The music is still (or: once again?) for the “connoisseur and the amateur”. The very existence of this music that is not “for the millions” is under threat and depends on the devotion of musicians and audiences in an indissoluble bond. We no longer have the monarchs, archdukes and noblemen of yesteryear.

What we hear has been enriched by the passing of two centuries and the gaining of wider experience. Progress indeed, might be your first thought, but perhaps we have also lost something along the way?

The ability to feel how groundbreaking and visionary this music was in those days. My colleagues and I feel that using instruments that are comparable to those of the time has helped us enormously in getting somewhat closer to the surprise, the bewilderment and the rapture that the musicians in Schuppanzigh’s quartet must have felt when they first came face to face with the newest and most innovative chamber music of the day.

Viola de Hoog



Working with 19th-century expressive tools in Beethoven's string quartets

Tempo

Research has demonstrated that the 19th century concept of tempo was much more flexible than the stricter adherence to metronome markings that became common in the 20th century would suggest. Composers such as Beethoven would have expected un-prescribed modifications of tempo and certainly also of rhythm, from performers playing their music.

In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that such modifications were an important and integral part of the revered 'German style', which was championed by Louis Spohr and Joseph Joachim. With the Narratio Quartet, we have experimented extensively with flexible tempo and rhythm. Once we had abandoned the rule of keeping a steady tempo throughout, we shaped our idea of what 19th-century flexibility might have sounded like in performance, largely based on our intuition. After all, we are not trying to recreate a historical truth, but we are trying to use 19th century expressive tools to perform as 21st century musicians for a 21st century audience. It has been striking for us to experience that ideas of flexibility of tempo and rhythm can be applied, not only in the revolutionary later quartets, but also in Beethoven's Opus 18, generally considered to be more classical or *Haydnesque*.

Vibrato

In the Violin methods by Spohr (1833) and Joachim/Moser (1905), vibrato is described as an ornament, to be applied only in special circumstances, not - as is common today - as an omnipresent element in sound production on stringed instruments.

There is much evidence to suggest that vibrato was used as an expressive tool to embellish individual notes in melody lines or to colour specific passages or themes. Furthermore, the use of vibrato was often connected to *sforzati*, accents or expressive signs, such as hairpins (< >) or the term 'dolce' in the score. Although it is clear (if only from the many warnings against it) that over the course of the 19th century, vibrato became more and more prominent, we feel as a quartet that much can be gained from using it sparsely. Not only does this create possibilities to highlight certain passages or notes, contrasting them to the ones without vibrato, but it also creates a transparent sound in which the harmonic tensions and resolutions can be felt very clearly. Finally, we think that the harnessed powerful intense vibrato sound, is not always helpful in portraying more delicate and fragile ideas, which seem to constitute such an important and beautiful part of Beethoven's quartets, the early ones as much as the later ones.

Portamento

Portamento is described in the violin methods of the 19th century as the most important expressive tool for string players, enabling them to imitate the human voice. Indeed, portamento is mentioned by Spohr and Joachim, before they discuss vibrato.

Over the course of the 20th century, as musicians began more and more to strive for a literal and precise representation of the printed score, portamento became less and less prominent. After all, it is very rarely marked in the score by composers and it takes place 'in between the printed notes.' The use of portamento can soften the rhythmic and melodic contours of the music.

Just like vibrato, portamento was a hotly discussed topic in the 19th century. Some were accused of applying it too often others of not using it sufficiently. We will never know how exactly it was applied in the German tradition of the era before truthful audio recording. For us in the Narratio quartet, experimenting with portamento has opened our ears to different ways of emphasising tension and relaxation in intervals, as well as the harmonic eb and flow. We realise that it is an acquired taste, but we are strengthened by Beethoven's enthusiasm for Domenico Dragonetti's (1763-1830) portamento playing. Cipriani Potter, who was on friendly terms with Beethoven, writes that Dragonetti's bass playing 'led him (Beethoven) to imagine [...] those slidings upon one string, which import so beautiful and spiritual a character to his chamber music'. Furthermore the violinist Ignace Schuppanzigh, who was such an important partner of Beethoven in premiering and (even in composing) the quartets is reported to have used slides (portamenti) extensively.

Johannes Leertouwer



Narratio Quartet

The narrative of the Amsterdam based Narratio Quartet began in 2009 when it was invited to perform Beethoven's last five string quartets on five consecutive nights at the Early Music Festival Utrecht. It is precisely these late Beethoven quartets which are rarely played on period instruments, using gut strings and 19th-century bows. Since then the quartet has worked backwards and here presents the complete cycle of Beethoven quartets.

The name "Narratio" refers to the art of rhetoric and illustrates the quartet's focus on storytelling and interaction between the musicians and also between the quartet and the audience. Their repertoire has expanded to the later 19th century with Brahms, Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn.

The musicians

Johannes Leertouwer performs as a soloist, chamber music player and conductor. For many years he was concertmaster of Anima Eterna and the Netherlands Bach Society. He is artistic director and conductor of the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht and violinist of Ensemble Schönbrunn since its foundation. He is a professor of Historically Informed Performance Practice at Seoul National University and works as a guest conductor and chamber music coach at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. He obtained his doctorate in 2023 from the University of Leiden on research into the performance practice of orchestral repertoire by Johannes Brahms.

Franc Polman, is a violinist in the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century and has played in prestigious baroque orchestras such as Musica Antiqua Köln and Les Musiciens du Louvre. He is active in several chamber music ensembles. Polman plays on a number of Amsterdam violins from the seventeenth century, built by Hendrik Jacobs and Pieter Rombouts.

Dorothea Vogel studied in Switzerland, the USA and London, where she has lived since her studies. She was violist of the Allegri Quartet for 20 years and is a member of the Primrose Piano Quartet. She also performs with the English baroque ensemble The Kings Consort. Dorothea teaches at the Royal Welsh College in Cardiff.

Viola de Hoog is a versatile musician. Her international career takes place in the world of early music, but for 20 years she also travelled all over the world as a member of the renowned Dutch Schönberg Quartet. She is cellist of Ensemble Schönbrunn, principal cellist of the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht and The Kings Consort. Viola has been professor of baroque cello, cello and chamber music at the conservatories of Amsterdam, Utrecht and Bremen since 1990.



Johannes Leertouwer

violin: Antonius et Hieronymus Fr. Amati, Cremona 1619
bow: collaboration John Dodd and Thomas Tubbs, ca 1820

Franc Polman

violin: Hendrik Jacobs, Amsterdam 1694
bow: John Dodd, London ca. 1800

Dorothea Vogel

viola: Ludovico Rastelli, Genoa, ca. 1800
bow: classical, Luis Emilio Rodríguez Carrington 2023

Viola de Hoog

cello: Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, Milan ca. 1750,
on loan from the Dutch Musical Instruments Foundation
bow: classical, Luis Emilio Rodríguez Carrington 2006

This recording was produced with the use of Sonodore microphones, Avalon Acoustic & Musikelectronic Geithain monitoring, Siltech Mono-Crystal cabling and dCS - & Merging Technologies converters.



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Opus 18. 1-2: 2-4 July 2023 • Opus 18. 3: 11-12 November 2023

Opus 18. 4-5: 11 & 13-14 January 2024 • Opus 18. 6: 8-9 February 2024

Recording: Northstar Recording Services bv

Recording producer, engineer, editing & mastering: Bert van der Wolf-Oude Avenhuis

A&R Challenge Classics by Marcel Landman, Valentine Laout & Mario Morese

Liner notes: Viola de Hoog & Johannes Leertouwer

Translations: Caecile de Hoog

Photos: Marten Root

Product coordination & graphic design: Natasja Wallenburg

**This production is also available as High Resolution digital download
at www.spiritofturtle.com**

www.challengerecords.com / www.johannesleertouwer.nl/narratio-nl

