

BEETHOVEN

THE LATE QUARTETS

The Budapest String Quartet
In Concert at The Library of Congress: 1941-1960

Joseph Roisman, violin 1 Alexander Schneider, violin 2

Boris Kroyt, viola Mischa Schneider, violoncello

Edgar Ortenberg, violin 2 (Op. 132)

Disc A (65:53)

Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135 (23:10)

1 I. Allegretto (6:05)

2 II. Vivace (3:08)

3 III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo (7:12)

4 IV. Der schwer gefasste Entschluss: Grave,
ma non troppo tratto--Allegro (6:32)

Performed and recorded on March 16, 1943

Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (42:29)

5 I. Assai sostenuto (9:33)

6 II. Allegro ma non tanto (6:50)

7 III. Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenden an
die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart.

Molto adagio--Neue Kraft fühlend
Andante (16:58)

8 IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace (2:16)

9 V. Allegro appassionato (6:33)

Performed and recorded on December 20, 1945

Disc B (68:36)

Quartet No. 14 in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 131 (34:45)

- 1 I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo (5:52)
- 2 II. Allegro molto vivace (2:50)
- 3 III. Allegro moderato (:38)
- 4 IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile--Più mosso--Andante moderato e lusinghiero--Adagio--Allegretto--Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice--Allegretto (12:18)
- 5 V. Presto (5:03)
- 6 VI. Adagio quasi un poco Andante (1:47)
- 7 VII. Allegro (6:16)

Performed and recorded on May 7, 1943

Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127 (33:38)

- 1 I. Maestoso--Allegro (6:07)
- 2 II. Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile--Andante con moto--Adagio molto espressivo (14:51)

3 III. Scherzando vivace--Presto (6:25)

4 IV. Finale (6:00)

Performed and recorded on March 15, 1941

Disc C (53:41)

Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major, Op. 130 (37:25)

- 1 I. Adagio, ma non troppo--Allegro (10:21)
- 2 II. Presto--L'istesso tempo (1:54)
- 3 III. Andante con moto, ma non troppo (6:27)
- 4 IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai (3:28)
- 5 V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo (7:13)
- 6 VI. Finale. Allegro (7:32)

Performed and recorded on April 7, 1960

7 Grosse Fuge, Op. 133 (16:05)

Overtura. Allegro--Fuga

Performed and recorded on April 7, 1960

Beethoven: The Late String Quartets
The Budapest String Quartet
In Concert at The Library of Congress: 1941-1960

The sixteen quartets and Great Fugue, which many consider to be Beethoven's highest achievement, were inextricably linked with that mid-20th century icon of chamber music, the Budapest String Quartet. It is largely because of the Budapest's steadfast and inspired advocacy that "the Beethoven Cycle" has become virtually a rite of passage today for all serious quartets. The Budapest, according to surviving but incomplete logs, gave its first complete public performance of this sublime music in London during November of 1930, eighteen years after its official debut in 1918. A second cycle was played in Copenhagen during the 1931-1932 season, leading to a proliferation of many others. Indeed, by January 18, 1965 (according to a program booklet of the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society), the Budapest had performed the cycle "upwards of sixty times." And these complete cycles were supplemented by hundreds of other individual Beethoven performances--some on all-Beethoven programs, others sharing the spotlight with the works of other composers.

Some contemporary quartets have performed the cycle in numerical order--a sequence that is, to my way of hearing, unimaginative, and not even chronologically apt (for as we know, Beethoven composed these works in a different order than the one in which they were published). The Budapest cycles were much more interestingly arranged, and always with the intention of providing audiences with varied, dramatic programs. Sometimes, when compressed to only five concerts, the Quartet in B-flat, Op. 130 was played

in its original version (which is to say, with its first five movements followed by the *Grosse Fuge*); in more expansive, six-concert presentations, Op. 130 was given both with its second Finale followed by the Fugue as a single sequence, or in some cycles, as separate works, interrupted by applause. Often, in these six-concert cycles, room would be found for additional Beethoven compositions (e.g., the composer's own F Major arrangement of his Piano Sonata No. 9 in E Major, Op. 14, No. 1, or his String Quintet, Op. 29).

The Budapest Quartet made three studio recordings of the cycle--once for 78 r.p.m. discs, once for monaural LPs, and, finally for stereophony. An agreement between Bridge Records, the Library of Congress, and the estates of the Budapest Quartet members gives the record company access to release outstanding performances from the Library's huge collection of concert transcriptions. Unlike any of the studio-made Budapest Quartet Beethoven recordings, the Library/Bridge cycle lets posterity experience the legendary foursome as it communicated to audiences at live concerts. For this recorded cycle the unedited performances have been selected from the Library's four complete cycles and numerous individual concerts with the hope of further documenting, whenever possible, periods of the Budapest Quartet's history not chronicled by its commercial recordings and connecting--or at least revising--common knowledge about its evolution and performance style.

The Library of Congress version of the Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127 dates from March 15, 1941, and predates the Budapest's first

complete cycle at the Library. The performance shares certain qualities with the contemporaneous Columbia 78 r.p.m. recording, including an inclination toward faster tempos than are heard in the later studio recordings. With an audience present, one has the impression of somewhat greater elasticity and freedom of inflection, and also of more humor and impetuosity. Certainly the advantages of straight-through performance (as opposed to the Procrustean considerations of 78 r.p.m. format, with the necessity of fitting the music to four-and-one-half-minute segments) can be clearly felt in the more communicative nuancing here, particularly in the third movement Trio, which takes off like a rocket in this concert performance.

The Quartet No. 13 in B-flat, Op. 130 and also its alternate original Finale, the *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133, come from the concert of April 7, 1960, part of The Library's fourth, and last, Budapest Beethoven cycle. Both, as it happens, show the late-period Budapest Quartet at its handsome best. Technically, the group plays with remarkably good intonation and with a *punctilio* that borders on the supernatural. The *Grosse Fuge* in this live version benefits from the group's willingness to take chances: an amazingly reckless (and wreckless!) revel.

The May 7, 1943 performance of the Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131, ended a concert that began with Haydn's "Sunrise" Quartet, Op. 76 No. 4, and continued with Milhaud's Quartet No. 11 (dedicated to the Budapest) and Charles T. Griffes' *Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes*. With a splendid studio recording of Op. 131 behind them (it had been made in the autumn of 1940, one of the first fruits of the new Columbia affiliation), and with three years of additional insights, the Budapest players were superbly

equipped to make an even more impressive assault on this musical Mount Everest: in terms of ensemble and technical poise, the 1943 concert version compares favorably with the 1940 and, indeed, is somewhat freer and more emotionally generous than that well-regarded paragon.

The Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132, as retrieved from this December 20, 1945 concert, is of particular interest as it furnishes important, and much-needed documentation of how the Budapest sounded when Edgar Ortenberg was its second violinist. The answer is "Very good, indeed." A comparison of this 1945 version with the group's three studio recordings provides the needed evolutionary link between the terse, forward-directed "Classical" compression of 1942 and the "Romantic" expansiveness of the two later ones. The scrupulous discipline and textural clarity of 1942 remains, but already the tempos have become a bit less pressured, and one discerns the beginning of a tendency to expand yieldingly, an example being the first movement's second subject. To be sure, the substitution of Ortenberg for Alexander Schneider did change the group's sound and style somewhat, making it a trifle more reserved emotionally and bringing it several steps closer to the then-modern "ideal."

In his biography of the Budapest Quartet, *Con Brio* [Oxford University Press, 1991], Nat Brandt tells how, on one of its early American visits, the quartet went to hear Toscanini conduct and were "overwhelmed by the clarity and precision of his interpretation." The Italian maestro liked to play the two inner movements of Beethoven's Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135, with the full complement of orchestral strings. When the Budapest's first recording of Op. 135 was made, I suspect that the quartet had not yet discovered Toscanini's way with this music. In the 1940 Columbia recording, the playing,

while beautiful, is nevertheless a trifle matter-of-fact and businesslike. One certainly cannot make that complaint about this concert performance of March 16, 1943 (the centerpiece of an all-Beethoven program that also contained the "Serioso," Op. 95 and the E minor *Razoumovsky*, Op. 59, No. 2). Here the Budapest's interpretation is at its most Toscanini-like--fiery, intense, and impetuous. Hearing the piece thus recreated, there can be little doubt that this is how "*Es Muss Sein*."

--Harris Goldsmith

Chamber Music and the Budapest Quartet at the Library of Congress

The history of the Budapest Quartet at the Library of Congress begins with an extraordinary gift to the Library that arrived a few years before the quartet's first concert there: five Stradivari instruments, donated by Gertrude Clarke Whittall in 1935-36. This set of Strads--three violins, a viola, and a cello, with matching Tourte bows--was then the only one in the United States, and the only one in the world to be owned by a public institution. How did the nation's library come to be in possession of these instruments and a resident ensemble to play them?

In making this gift Gertrude Clarke Whittall was following the pioneering footsteps of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who founded the concert series at the Library of Congress. The 500-seat auditorium Mrs. Coolidge endowed in 1925 has been home to many of the century's most distinguished musicians--Adolph Busch and Rudolf Serkin, Igor Stravinsky, Gregor

Piatigorsky, Nathan Milstein, Leopold Stokowski, Josef Szigeti, Leontyne Price, Aaron Copland, Roland Hayes, and many more. Mrs. Coolidge's vision and dedication made the Library an international music center, with a strong commitment to new works; her Coolidge Festivals presented such composers as Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith, and the commissioning tradition she inaugurated continues today with a roster of more than three hundred commissions.

These remarkable women--who could be called the two great benefactors of chamber music in the United States--made a formidable team. Their contributions were complementary, with Mrs. Coolidge looking forward, to new music, and Mrs. Whittall looking back, to the masterpieces of the past. There was a not inconsiderable rivalry between the two, as patrons of two important foundations within the Library of Congress. The Coolidge Foundation was clearly a model for Mrs. Whittall's success in establishing the Whittall Foundation, and the string quartet residency she envisioned depended on the concert hall Mrs. Coolidge had built nearly a decade earlier.

On December 14, 1937, Mrs. Whittall gave a brief, pre-concert radio address to the nation. "These instruments were made by the great craftsman Antonio Stradivarius. I held them in trust for a short time, and now they belong to every one of you, for they were given to our government to hold and protect forever." She also donated funds for the Whittall Pavilion, adjacent to the Coolidge Auditorium, which was intended for lectures and other public events on an intimate scale, and as an exhibition space for the instruments. She endowed the Whittall Foundation to ensure the Strads' future use at chamber concerts--the foundation which has supported the Library's string quartet residency for almost sixty years, held first by the Budapest, and today,

by the Juilliard Quartet. And she bought for the Library a number of treasures, including the personal papers of Niccoló Paganini and a vast collection of autograph manuscripts by composers from Bach. Beethoven and Brahms--her favorite--to Arnold Schoenberg. She was an enthusiastic audience member; elegantly turned out, she was a tiny, determined figure at all the concerts sponsored by her foundation until her death, sitting in a special seat equipped with a device to amplify the sound. As she was somewhat deaf, her comments could often be overheard around the auditorium, which was prized for its superb acoustic properties. Anticipating one such moment, just before the beginning of a piece, Alexander Schneider leaned to the audience to remark, "But first, a word from our sponsor."

When Mrs. Whittall's instruments first came to the Library in the mid-nineteen thirties, the question of their use and function was still to be fully determined. A museum exhibit was not acceptable. She wanted to make sure they were played, "put to the use for which they were intended." The dilemma of how best to preserve them--and share them with the nation--was a tough one. Today it's almost amusing to read a Music Division memorandum proposing that a foursome of musicians be hired to play the Strads at regular intervals for the fee of two dollars and fifty cents an hour.

"The instruments gave us a lot of trouble at first," wrote Dr. Harold Spivacke, Chief of the Music Division from 1937 to 1972. "Not many artists cared to play them after only short rehearsals. String players always need time to get used to another instrument. Among a number of quartets we invited for single concerts was the Budapest. It gave its first concert here in December 1938, shortly after its members had decided to settle in the United States. They played well, but it was the old story--they didn't like to perform on



Portrait of Mrs. Gertrude Clarke Whittall

unfamiliar instruments. So we did a little thinking. Suppose we had a quartet in residence here, and the players had time to make friends with these beautiful instruments? This looked to us like the answer, and the following year we offered the Budapest a contract to play a total of twenty concerts at the Library in the spring and fall."

The Budapest Quartet was already internationally celebrated when the artists gave their first performance in the Coolidge Auditorium on December 8, 1938. "The Budapest Quartet was the great quartet of its time," violinist Robert Mann says. "They were a household word. You would know that waiters and airline stewardesses knew who the Budapest Quartet was--they were the most famous ensemble known by name in the world." *The New York Herald Tribune* called the Budapest "the high priests of music;" in 1938 *The New York Times* proclaimed, "If there is a finer string foursome in existence than the Budapest, it has not made itself known on this side of the Atlantic." When the quartet arrived at the Library of Congress the artists were not strangers to the United States--an earlier incarnation of the group had made its American debut in 1931. But the offer of a residency at the Library of Congress gave the artists a new home: Washington. They embarked on a relationship with the Music Division that was very much a familial one, documented by five fat files of letters and postcards to Mrs. Whittall, Harold Spivacke and the Music Division staff, including the recording engineers who remember listening to the World Series with the Budapest players in the studio behind the auditorium.

When we talked with Alexander Schneider about the early days of the Budapest's residency, he laughed and described their feelings on becoming

associated with the Library of Congress and taking possession of the Strads. "Well, first of all, we felt, all four of us, specially honored--My God!--to be at the Library of Congress, that was really like you were becoming the Prime Ministers, you know, or even in the Cabinet. Four of us! And, also to have five incredible instruments--not that you had to play them, we were very proud to play them--imagine that!--to play five Stradivarius, you could choose which one you wanted. It was really very special. We had very good instruments, already, but certainly nothing like those five Strads."

The Budapest would become quartet-in-residence at the Library of Congress in 1940, a residency that would last twenty-two years, and would have an incalculable effect on chamber music making in the United States. The Library residency was the center of their activities, but they also toured, gave an annual summer series at Mills College, and taught generations of students at the Marlboro Festival, including Samuel Rhodes and Joel Smirnoff of the Juilliard Quartet, and David Starobin, the guitarist and co-producer of this series of recordings. Their widest influence, however, resulted from the Library's leading role in broadcasting classical music. Spurred by the visionary Mrs. Coolidge, the Library had made trial broadcasts of chamber music as early as 1930, and by 1933, working in cooperation with the five-year old National Broadcasting Company, was ready to broadcast its chamber music concerts to the nation. It is not an exaggeration to say that these broadcasts helped to create an American audience for chamber music.

This Beethoven cycle, and the other Budapest recordings in the Bridge Records-Library of Congress series, reflect the quartet's history at the Library of Congress, a remarkable documentation distinguished by two unusual circumstances. First, all the Budapest's more than 460 Library

performances were played on the Stradivari instruments. Only a very few commercial recordings were made on these instruments, which are part of the Library's collections and must remain on the premises. Second, the existence of the recordings themselves, resulting from the Library's foresight in recording its concerts from 1937 onward.

On taking up residency at the Library, the Budapest found an audience that was intelligent, sophisticated, enthusiastic, even passionate, an audience that had heard many of the world's great string quartets in the Coolidge Auditorium--including the Flonzaley, Kolisch, Griller, Coolidge, Gordon, and Stradivarius quartets, among others. Veterans will tell you that there was a sense of camaraderie, a bond resulting from hours spent waiting in long lines for the early morning ticket distribution by Washington impresario Patrick Hayes at a downtown music store. They remember clearly the inimitable sound of the Budapest, the warmth and richness of tone, the carefully synchronized vibrato and seamless legato--a mysterious quality that is difficult to elucidate but is immediately identifiable more than half a century later.

In producing these recordings by the Budapest Quartet we have been gratified by the number of people who have admired them with us, talking about the timelessness of the performances. No doubt there are many reasons why they speak so strongly to the heart and remain so powerful. The four players were great artists; their lives had been spent close to the source, so to speak, of much of the music they played, trained by the great musicians of their day. As Alexander Schneider said, "we were four Russians, all of us educated in Germany--Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig. Our direction was, musically, Schoenberg, Berg, Hindemith, Bartók--nice composers, not

bad! Furtwangler, Klemperer, Walter, Kleiber...Schnabel, Hubermann, Rubinstein were there. It was a fantastic life we had. All those people--you were influenced by making music." One can speculate what emotional impetus their American exile gave to their playing, perhaps in part accounting for the emotional intensity that comes through in every Budapest performance. Other factors to be added to the analysis are the Whittall Strads, the acoustic excellence of the Coolidge Auditorium, and the Library audience, with its passion for chamber music. But in the end nothing can really be explained. We can only say that it is a joy to share this extraordinary archive, and to say with pride that at the Library of Congress the musical legacy of the Budapest String Quartet is still very much alive.

--Anne McLean, Music Division
The Library of Congress

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Front booklet cover photograph: courtesy of June Schneider
Back booklet cover photograph: Budapest Quartet in the Whittall Pavilion, holding Whittall Stradivarius instruments
Painted miniature of Gertude Clarke Whittall: Laura Hills, from the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Foundation Collection in the Library of Congress
Back tray photograph: Budapest Quartet in concert in the Coolidge Auditorium

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These Library of Congress/Bridge titles are also available:

BRAHMS: Quintet in F minor, Op. 34; **SCHUBERT:** "Trout" Quintet, Op. 114
George Szell, piano; The Budapest String Quartet **BRIDGE 9062**

RACHMANINOFF: String Quartets No. 1 & 2; Trio élégiaque, Op. 9
Artur Balsam, piano; The Budapest String Quartet **BRIDGE 9063**

NATHAN MILSTEIN: *The 1946 Library of Congress Recital*, Vitali: Chaconne;
J.S. Bach: Sonata in G minor, BWV 1001; Milstein: Paganiniana (Variations);
Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto; Chopin: Nocturne in C-sharp minor;
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THE BUDAPEST STRING QUARTET: Haydn: Quartet, Op. 64, No. 5 "The
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