

# Beethoven

## THE EARLY STRING QUARTETS

*The Budapest String Quartet*

Joseph Roisman, violin 1  
Edgar Ortenberg, violin 2 (Disc A)  
Alexander Schneider, violin 2 (Disc B)  
Boris Kroyt, viola  
Mischa Schneider, violoncello

### DISC A [67:41]

#### STRING QUARTET NO. 1 in F Major Op. 18, No. 1 [27:42]

1. Allegro con brio [7:07]
2. Adagio affettuoso  
ed appassionato [10:53]
3. Scherzo: Allegro molto [3:12]
4. Allegro [6:30]

*Recorded in concert, March 23, 1944*

#### STRING QUARTET NO. 2 in G Major Op. 18, No. 2 [20:06]

5. Allegro [5:16]
6. Adagio cantabile - Allegro -  
Tempo I [6:03]
7. Scherzo: Allegro [3:49]
8. Allegro molto, quasi presto [4:58]

*Recorded in concert, April 13, 1944*

#### STRING QUARTET NO. 3 in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3 [19:12]

9. Allegro [5:14]
10. Andante con moto [7:22]
11. Allegro [2:37]
12. Presto [3:59]

*Recorded in concert, March 9, 1944*

### DISC B [77:27]

#### STRING QUARTET NO. 4 in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4 [21:24]

1. Allegro ma non tanto [6:54]
2. Andante scherzoso quasi  
Allegretto [5:39]
3. Menuetto: Allegretto [4:26]
4. Allegro - Prestissimo [4:25]

*Recorded in concert March 30, 1962*

#### STRING QUARTET NO. 5 in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5 [22:35]

5. Allegro [4:35]
6. Menuetto [4:51]
7. Andante cantabile [8:42]
8. Allegro [4:27]

*Recorded in concert, November 1, 1943*

**STRING QUARTET NO. 6 in  
B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6** [24:07]

9. Allegro con brio [4:55]  
10. Adagio ma non troppo [6:57]  
11. Scherzo: Allegro [3:16]  
12. La Malinconia: Adagio –  
Allegretto quasi Allegro [8:59]

*Recorded in concert, November 11, 1960*

13. Rehearsal fragment,  
(Edgar Ortenberg, violin 2)  
April 13, 1944 [9:21]

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*courtesy of June Schneider*

**T**he present recordings of Beethoven's Op. 18 ("The Early Quartets"), which took place in the Library of Congress's Coolidge Auditorium (1943–1962), performed by the legendary Budapest String Quartet, complete Bridge's Library of Congress Beethoven cycle. The Bridge/LOC cycle stands alongside the Budapest's first studio recordings made for HMV, RCA Victor and Columbia Records in the 20s, 30s and 40s, issued on 78rpm, and their two Beethoven cycles for Columbia: the 1950s studio recordings made at the Library of Congress between 1958 and 1961 on the Library's Stradivarius instruments, issued initially on monaural LPs, (currently available on CD on SONY Classics); and the 1960s stereo version issued on LP. The Bridge/LOC cycle spans the twenty-two seasons during which the Budapest was the resident quartet at the Library of Congress, 1940–1962.

In his notes to the Bridge/LOC Beethoven "Late Quartets" (BRIDGE 9072A/C), Harris Goldsmith writes that "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 Bridge/LOC cycle was chosen from more than 100 surviving recordings of Beethoven quartets from concert performances the Budapest String Quartet gave in the Coolidge Auditorium between 1938 and 1962. The performances of Op. 18 herein are divided between Edgar Ortenberg (Disc A) and Alexander "Sasha" Schneider (Disc B) performing on second violin. The rest of the quartet's personnel remained constant through the years encompassed by the Bridge/LOC cycle: Joseph Roisman, first violin; Boris Kroyt, viola; and Mischa Schneider, violoncello.

The performances of Op. 18, Nos. 1, 2 & 3 all come from 1944, the year that Edgar Ortenberg replaced Sasha Schneider as the quartet's second violinist. Schneider had "wrestled with the idea of resigning from the Quartet for more than a year."<sup>1</sup> Ortenberg and Roisman had both studied with the same teacher in Russia (Pyotr Stoliarsky); eight years earlier Roisman had asked Ortenberg to join the quartet as violist, a request that Ortenberg turned down. On the evidence of these performances, though he had never played 2nd violin before, Ortenberg blended in quickly with the quartet's style, with the performances of Op. 18 No. 2 and 3, in particular, showing his ability to cope with blazingly fast tempi, a well-matched vibrato in slow movements, and solid intonation. Remarkably, the performance of Op. 18, No. 3 on March 9, 1944, is drawn from Ortenberg's debut performance with the quartet (an all-Beethoven program which also included Opp. 95 and 127). The flexibility and brilliant tempi (listen to Op. 18, No. 3, movement 4) give no hint that this was Ortenberg's very first concert with the quartet.

Alas, in the ensuing five years, things did not go well for Ortenberg. Initially, reviews of the Quartet were glowing, but Ortenberg's sound and approach were not as aggressive as Schneider's had been, and the critics began to find fault with the blend of the ensemble. B.H. Haggin, writing in "The Nation" opined that there "can be no doubt of the loss to the quartet through Alexander Schneider's departure....Ortenberg's own playing lacks the vitality and style Schneider's had." Nat Brandt, in his invaluable book "Con Brio", written in consultation with the Quartet, notes that "For Ortenberg, fatigue was the culprit. He complained not only about the lack of rehearsal time but also that their concert schedule was too crowded and exhausting. He counted only twenty-three times that he had



slept in his own bed at home during one twelve-month period.”<sup>2</sup> In late 1948 Ortenberg was informed that the Quartet was looking for a second violinist, and in March 1949, he was replaced by Jac Gorodetzky. The very capable playing on these recordings, at the beginning of Ortenberg’s tenure with the Budapest, gives evidence to support Brandt’s theory that fatigue may have been a factor in the gradual deterioration of the Quartet’s relationship with Ortenberg.

Disc B, with Sasha Schneider on second violin shows the Quartet at its peak, as well as in the final seasons of its twenty-two-year tenure at the Library of Congress. The March 30, 1962 performance of Op. 18, No. 4 is from the final performance given by the Budapest as Quartet in Residence at the Library of Congress. The recording has great focus, vivacity and drive, although problems in Roisman’s intonation occasionally flare up. After Roisman had broken his left wrist in 1952, his ability to vibrate and shift with precision was undoubtedly impaired. In late December of 1960, he suffered a heart attack that apparently also left him scarred emotionally. Mischa Schneider is quoted as saying: “He’s so afraid of life. He thinks he’s the sickest man in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Despite these problems, and the disappointment the group undoubtedly felt at being let go by the Library, this characterful reading shows the Quartet immersed in the score to excellent effect.

The November 1, 1943 performance of Op. 18, No. 5 finds the Quartet at the very top of its form. Here we have Roisman’s elegant yet intensely rhythmic leadership, Sasha’s driving support (listen to the way he leads the climactic variation in the third movement), Boris Kroyt’s incomparably musical viola playing, and Mischa Schneider’s rock solid anchoring of the ensemble. Writing

of the Quartet’s 1938 debut at Town Hall, *New York Times* critic Noel Straus reported that: “If there is a finer string foursome in existence than the Budapest String Quartet, it has not made itself known on this side of the Atlantic...Here is a quartet unrivaled for balance and blending of suave, soulful and immaculately pure tone, which achieves a unity of effect that could hardly be bettered, and brings a poetry and understanding to its interpretations unmatched by any other organization of the kind today.” All of these qualities are amply demonstrated in this superb reading.

Beethoven’s Op. 18, No. 6, is frequently acknowledged as the masterpiece of his early quartets, and this 1960 reading contains many of the hallmarks of the Budapest’s finest work. Here, we find rhythmic precision, uncanny unanimity of phrasing and bow stroke, perfection of balance and blend, and a complete commitment to an interpretation developed over the decades. Comparing this reading with the Budapest’s 1958 Columbia recording, the live 1960 performance breathes more, shows greater freedom in phrasing, and has greater pathos in the slow music, with more rhythmic verve and color in the faster movements.

—David Starobin

1 *Con Brio*, by Nat Brandt 1993, Oxford University Press, p. 100

2 *Ibid*, p. 108

3 *Ibid*, p. 170

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