

ArtPower
University of California San Diego

ARIEL QUARTET

January 18, 2019 at 8 pm

Department of Music's Conrad Prebys Concert Hall





University of California San Diego

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UC San Diego

ArtPower presents **Ariel Quartet Beethoven Cycle, Part I**

January 18, 2019 at 8 pm
Department of Music's
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

Alexandra Kazovsky, *violin*
Gershon Gerchikov, *violin*
Jan Grüning, *viola*
Amit Even-Tov, *cello*

Program

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Quartet in F major, Op. 18, No. 1 (1798-1800)
Allegro con brio
Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Allegro

Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, "Serioso" (1810-11)
Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace ma serioso
Larghetto espressivo; Allegretto agitato

INTERMISSION

Quartet in G major, Op. 18, No. 2 (1798-1800)
Allegro
Adagio cantabile
Scherzo: Allegro
Allegro molto quasi presto

Quartet in F major, Op. 135 (1826)
Allegretto
Vivace
Assai lento, cantante e tranquillo
Grave, ma non troppo tratto; Allegro

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About the Program

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

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 17, 1770, Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Some composers have an instinctive sense of form. Some do not. Mozart seems to have been born with a grasp of sonata form, but it took Beethoven a difficult decade of lessons, trial and error, and practice to achieve that same command. The string quartet, with its complex interplay of four equal and flexible voices, gave Beethoven particular trouble. The quartets of Mozart and Haydn (who was still writing quartets even as Beethoven began to explore the form) must have seemed a daunting challenge for the young composer, and Beethoven worked for several years on the six quartets that make up his Opus 18 before publishing them in 1801.

In the case of the Quartet in F Major, Beethoven's struggles with the form can be followed in some detail. The young composer had become close friends in Vienna with the violinist Karl Amenda, and when the latter left Vienna in June 1799, Beethoven gave him a manuscript copy of this quartet with the inscription: "Take this quartet as a small memorial of our friendship, and whenever you play it recall the days we passed together and the sincere affection felt for you then . . ." But when it came time to publish the set of six quartets in 1801, Beethoven realized that the Quartet in F Major had become quite a different piece of music from the earlier version given to Amenda, and now he did not want a superseded version floating around. He quickly wrote to his friend: "Do not lend your Quartet to anybody, because I have greatly changed it, having just learned how to write quartets properly!" Amenda's version survived (and has been recorded), so we can watch Beethoven develop as he "learned to write quartets properly!"

The Quartet in F Major remains the most popular of his Opus 18, largely because of its impressive first two movements. The *Allegro con brio* is an early example of Beethoven's fascination with building large structures out of simple motives: this movement grows out of the simple turn-figure heard in its first instant. This figure will saturate the movement—as theme, as accompaniment, as rhythm, as the basis for complex counterpoint. The movement actually has a relaxed second subject that flows easily on syncopated accents, but so overwhelming is the presence of the motif-figure that one seems to hear it even when it is not physically present. In fact, one of the effects of Beethoven's revisions was to diminish the number of appearances of this turn-figure—by one scholar's count, Beethoven reduced the number of its appearances from 130 in the first version to 104 in the published edition.

The second movement, which has the complex marking *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*, switches to dark D minor. Over a pulsing 9/8 accompaniment, the first violin sings the long, grieving melody that forms the basis of this movement. Everyone feels the expressive power of this movement, and when Amenda told the composer that it reminded him of the parting of lovers, Beethoven replied: "I thought of the scene in the burial vault in *Romeo and Juliet*." Listeners will do well not to look for any literal depiction of Shakespeare here, but rather to take the music on its own merits:

it has more genial secondary material, and across its long span the music rises to several impassioned climaxes.

After two such movements, the final two can seem a little anti-climactic. In fact, their combined length is shorter than the *Adagio*. With its propulsive rising main theme, the *Scherzo* has reminded many of the third movement of Beethoven's First Symphony, composed as the composer was seeing these quartets to press; the trio, with its grace notes and octave leaps, sends the first violin sailing along an athletic part before it swoops gracefully back into the opening strain. The concluding *Allegro* is in sonata-rondo form. Its showers of triplets at first mask the true meter (2/4), and some of the fun of this movement lies in Beethoven's contrast of triple and duple stresses. Beethoven revised this movement extensively as well, and his changes clarified the voicing and focused the climaxes much more effectively than before he "learned to write quartets properly!"

Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, "Serioso"

Beethoven's manuscript for the Quartet in F Minor is dated October 1810, but almost certainly he continued to work on this quartet for some years after that, and it was not published until 1816. This quartet has a nickname, "Quartetto Serioso," that—unusually for a musical nickname—came from the composer himself. Well aware of the music's extraordinary character, Beethoven described the quartet as having been "written for a small circle of connoisseurs and . . . never to be performed in public." Joseph Kerman has described it as "an involved, impassioned, highly idiosyncratic piece, problematic in every one of its movements, advanced in a hundred ways" and "unmatched in Beethoven's output for compression, exaggerated articulation, and a corresponding sense of extreme tension." Yet this same quartet—virtually the shortest of Beethoven's string quartets—comes from the same period as the easily accessible "Archduke" Trio, the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, and the incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*, and this music's extraordinary focus and tension seem sharply at odds with those scores. In fact, this quartet in many ways prefigures Beethoven's late style and the great cycle of quartets written during his final years.

The first movement is extraordinarily compressed (it lasts barely four minutes), and it catapults listeners through an unexpected series of key relationships. The unison opening figure is almost spit out, passing through and ending in a "wrong" key and then followed by complete silence. Octave leaps and furious restatements of the opening figure lead to the swaying second subject, announced in flowing triplets by the viola. The development section of this (highly modified) sonata-form movement is quite short, treating only the opening theme, before the movement exhausts itself on fragments of that theme.

The marking of the second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, might seem to suggest some relief, but this movement is even more closely argued than the first. The cello's strange descending line introduces a lovely opening melody, but this quickly gives way to a long and complex fugue, its sinuous subject announced by the viola and then taken up and developed by the other voices. A quiet close (derived from the cello's introduction) links this movement to the third, a violent fast movement marked *Allegro assai vivace ma serioso*. The movement is in ABABA form, the explosive opening section alternating

with a chorale-like subject for the lower three voices which the first violin decorates. Once again, Beethoven takes each section into unexpected keys. The last movement has a slow introduction—*Larghetto espressivo*—full of the darkness that has marked the first three movements, and this leads to a blistering finale that does much to dispel the tension. In an oft-quoted remark about the arrival of this theme, American composer Randall Thompson is reported to have said: “No bottle of champagne was ever uncorked at a better moment.” In contrast, for example, to the near-contemporary Seventh Symphony, which ends in wild celebration, this quartet has an almost consciously anti-heroic close, concluding with a very fast coda that Beethoven marks simply *Allegro*.

Some have felt that the Quartet in F Minor is composed with the same technique as the late quartets but without their sense of spiritual elevation, and in this sense they see the present quartet as looking ahead toward Beethoven’s late style. But it is unfair to this music to regard it simply as a forerunner of another style. This quartet may well be dark, explosive, and extremely concentrated. But it should be valued for just those qualities.

Quartet in G major, Op. 18, No. 2

It has been easy for some to overlook the six quartets of Beethoven’s Opus 18, composed during the years 1798–1800, especially in light of his astonishing expansion of string quartet form over the course of his career. Some have been quick to point out the influence of Haydn and Mozart (influences the young Beethoven would readily have acknowledged), while others have found these works wanting because they do not approach—or even point the way toward—Beethoven’s later quartets. For many listeners, these early quartets remain—in Joseph Kerman’s elegant phrase—“a merely mortal, not a celestial, nourishment.”

Nevertheless, this first set of quartets offers many pleasures, including the stormy Fourth, the experimental Sixth, and the motivic concentration of the First. Among the Opus 18 quartets, the Second—in G major—is easily the most good-natured: if Beethoven does not set out to be comic in this music, there are moments when he comes very close to that.

The courtly and graceful themes of the opening *Allegro* have drawn particular attention. Their regular phrase-lengths and the question-and-answer quality of some of the writing have suggested an extra-musical discourse, and certain observers have gone so far as to hear in this movement an urbane and civilized conversation; every commentator feels obligated to mention that this quality has earned the music the nickname *Komplimentierungsquartett* (“Compliments-Quartet”) in Germany. Listeners should be warned not to search for a literal depiction of a conversation—that nickname refers more to the music’s gracious atmosphere. Given all this geniality, the recapitulation brings a nice bump when Beethoven combines his two themes and has the first try to sing over the suddenly-fierce rhythms of the second.

The *Adagio cantabile*, in C major, seems similarly urbane: its themes are smooth and well-proportioned, and the movement might promise blandness were it not for an unusual episode at the center that changes everything. The opening music slows and seems to conclude with a quiet cadence, but Beethoven then transforms that cadence-rhythm into a blistering (and completely unexpected) *Allegro*. This section

dashes about breathlessly and then vanishes, all within the space of forty seconds, but now the opening material is greatly embellished when it returns. Evidence from Beethoven’s manuscripts suggests that this fast center section was a late addition to the movement.

The sparkling *Scherzo* is pleasing music: it gracefully tosses rhythmic bits between the four instruments, and its trio section demands virtuoso playing from the first violin. Beethoven himself referred to the *Allegro molto quasi presto* as “ausgeknopft”: “unbuttoned.” The main theme of this rondo-finale is in fact derived from a transition passage in the opening movement, and this movement is full of bright energy, relaxed spirits, and a sense of fun. Beethoven brings back some of the rhythms of the *Scherzo*, and once again there are concertante passages for the first violin in the energetic coda.

Quartet in F major, Op. 135

This quartet—Beethoven’s last complete composition—comes from the fall of 1826, one of the blackest moments in his life. During the previous two years, he had written three string quartets on commission from Prince Nikolas Galitzin, and another, the Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Opus 131, composed between January and June 1826. Even then Beethoven was not done with the possibilities of the string quartet: he pressed on with yet another, making sketches for the Quartet in F Major during the summer of 1826.

At that point his world collapsed. His twenty-year-old nephew Karl, who had become Beethoven’s ward after a bitter court fight with the boy’s mother, attempted suicide on July 30. The composer was shattered—friends reported that he suddenly looked seventy years old. At the end of September, when the young man had recovered enough to travel, Beethoven took him—and the sketches for the new quartet—to the country home of Beethoven’s brother Johann in Gneixendorf, a village about thirty miles west of Vienna. There, as he nursed Karl back to health, Beethoven’s own health began to fail. He would get up and compose at dawn, spend his days walking through the fields, and then resume composing in the evening. In Gneixendorf he completed the Quartet in F Major in October and wrote a new finale to his earlier Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130. These were his final works. When Beethoven returned to Vienna in December, he went almost immediately to bed and died the following March.

One would expect music composed under such turbulent circumstances to be anguished, but the Quartet in F Major is radiant music, full of sunlight—it is as if Beethoven achieved in this quartet the peace unavailable to him in life. This is the shortest of the late quartets, and while this music remains very much in Beethoven’s late style, it returns to the classical proportions (and mood) of the Haydn quartets.

The opening movement, significantly marked *Allegretto* rather than the expected *Allegro*, is the one most often cited as Haydnesque. It is in sonata form—though a sonata form without overt conflict—and Beethoven builds it on brief thematic fragments rather than long melodies. This is poised, relaxed music, and the final cadence—on the falling figure that has run throughout the movement—is remarkable

for its understatement. By contrast, the Vivace bristles with energy. Its outer sections rocket along on a sharply-syncopated main idea, while the vigorous trio sends the first violin sailing high above the other voices. The very ending is impressive: the music grows quiet, comes to a moment of stasis, and then Beethoven wrenches it to a stop with a sudden, stinging surprise.

The slow movement—Beethoven marks it *Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo*—is built on the first violin's heartfelt opening melody. This opening is in D-flat major, but for the central episode Beethoven slows down even further (the marking is *Più lento*), moves to C-sharp minor, and writes music of a prayer-like simplicity. This section, full of halting rhythms, spans only ten measures before the return of the opening material, now elaborately decorated. The final movement has occasioned the most comment. In the manuscript, Beethoven noted two three-note mottos at its beginning under the heading *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*: "The Difficult Resolution." The first, solemnly intoned by viola and cello, asks the question: "Muss es sein?" ("Must it be?"). The violins' inverted answer, which comes at the Allegro, is set to the words "Es muss sein!" ("It must be!"). Coupled with the fact that this quartet is virtually Beethoven's final composition, these mottos have given rise to a great deal of pretentious nonsense from certain commentators, mainly to the effect that they must represent Beethoven's last thoughts, a stirring philosophical affirmation of life's possibilities. The actual origins of this motto are a great deal less imposing, for they arose from a dispute over an unpaid bill, and as a private joke for friends Beethoven wrote a humorous canon on the dispute, the theme of which he later adapted for this quartet movement. In any case, the mottos furnish the opening material for what turns out to be a powerful but essentially cheerful movement—the second theme radiates a childlike simplicity. The coda, which begins pizzicato, gradually gives way to bowed notes and a cadence on the "Es muss sein!" motto.

Program note by Eric Bromberger

About the Artists

Ariel Quartet

Distinguished by its virtuosity, probing musical insight, and impassioned, fiery performances, the Ariel Quartet has garnered critical praise worldwide over the span of nearly two decades. Formed in Israel as teenagers at the Jerusalem Academy Middle School of Music and Dance, the Ariel was named recipient of the prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award, granted by Chamber Music America in recognition of artistic achievement and career support. The ensemble serves as the Faculty Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, where they direct the chamber-music program and present a concert series, in addition to maintaining a busy touring schedule in the United States and abroad.

Following appearances at leading festivals in the United States, Canada, and Italy, the Ariel Quartet began the 2018–19 season at the Newport Music Festival, followed by Music Mountain in Lakeville, CT, where they were joined by clarinetist Oskar Espina Ruiz for an all-Mozart program. Additional fall engagements included programs in New York and Washington, D.C., and concerts with Calgary Pro Musica, where the Ariel Quartet gave the Canadian premiere of John Harbison's String Quartet No. 6. In November, the quartet embarked on a European tour, with dates in Basel, Paris, and Berlin. Highlights of 2019 are performances at the University of California San Diego and Mannes School of Music in New York. The Ariel Quartet is presented by Music Toronto and Chamber Music Society of Utica, where they are joined by pianist Orion Weiss for the Schumann Piano Quartet and the Brahms Piano Quintet. At the Linton Chamber Music Series in Cincinnati, the Ariel gives the U.S. premiere of the Quintet for Piano and Strings by Daniil Trifonov, with the composer as pianist.

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PROGRAM

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A Minor, op. 50; Sergey Rachmaninoff: *Trio élégiaque* in D Minor, op. 9



St. Lawrence String Quartet with Stephen Prutsman

Fri. April 26, 2019, at 8 pm
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall
Tickets: \$40–54;
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PROGRAM

Robert Schumann: Quintet in E-flat Major, op. 44; Joseph Haydn: String Quartet in F Minor, op. 55 no. 2 "The Razor"; Stephen Prutsman: *Color Preludes* for Piano and Strings