

THE ARTARIA STRING QUARTET

2017-18 Season

Basically Beethoven

Program IV

The Artaria String Quartet completes its impressive “Basically Beethoven” series by bringing Walter Piston into the arena—a daring feat in itself. While Beethoven and Piston represent two different periods of composition, the Classical and the Modern, there is a certain logic to the Artaria’s coupling of the two composers whose works on this program both reflect innovative compositional techniques. While Beethoven may appear to represent the traditional voice and Piston the modern one, both composers take new compositional and emotional directions in their treatment of the string quartet. To hear the two on one program is a remarkable auditory experience.

Walter Piston (1894-1976)

String Quartet No. 1

Allegro

Adagio

Allegro vivace

If Walter Piston is better known for the four editions of his classic book on harmony than for his five string quartets, it is understandable but unfortunate. Despite the powerful impact of his writing on harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration, it would seem well to have his string quartets on the same level of recognition. Hearing his String Quartet No. 1, composed in 1933, will confirm that.

Piston graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard and taught there from 1926 until his retirement in 1960. His students included no less than Leonard Bernstein, Elliott Carter, John Harbison, and Frederic Rzewski, and hearing the music of those composers will easily reveal Piston’s influence on them. His own influences include Nadia Boulanger, Paul Dukas, and George Enesco. Piston’s study of Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve tone system is reflected in his Sonata for Flute and Piano (1930), his First Symphony (1937), and his *Chromatic Study on the Name of Bach* for organ (1940). Although he employed that system in other later works, his music should not be defined in terms of one technique or “system.” To declare it devoid of emotional content is a serious mistake often committed in evaluating music composed in the twelve-tone system.

In the first movement of his String Quartet No. 1, Piston is just an exciting breath away from traditional harmony and melody. Rhythmically the movement is propulsive and urgent. Emotionally it leans toward darkness. The second movement *Adagio* might well compete with Barber’s famous *Adagio* from his Op. 11 String Quartet except that it is, compositionally speaking, more innovative. Yet it is wrought with as much sadness as the more popular work. The final *Allegro vivace* is a craftsman-like exploration of intense and propulsive rhythmic effects that concludes with a bow to traditional tonality.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132

Assai sostenuto; Allegro

Allegro ma non tanto

Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in

der lydischen tonart: Molto adagio; Neue Kraft fühlend: Andante

Alla marcia, assai vivace

Allegro appassionato

Opp. 127, 130, 131, 132, and 135, plus the *Grosse Fuga*, comprise Beethoven's Late Period quartets. They were all composed between May of 1824 and November of 1826, just four months before his death in 1827. Opp. 127, 130, and 132 were commissioned by Prince Nikolai Galitzin, a Russian nobleman and amateur cellist. Opp. 131 and 135 were written without commission. This same period brought the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony although it is the late quartets that are considered Beethoven's crowning achievement. How this music emerged from a time so fraught with illness and despair is one of its ultimate mysteries, explained only by the sheer force of genius—a genius that itself remains inexplicable. These quartets represent a culmination of greatness that defies definition, an endless source of wonder for performer, scholar, and listener.

Beethoven's late quartets so stretched the early 19th century imagination that it would be years before they came into their own. Even with that, the French critic Pierre Scudo in 1862 called them: "the polluted source from which have sprung the evil musicians of modern Germany, the Liszts, Wagners, Schumanns, not to mention Mendelssohn in certain equivocal details of his style." Fortunately the accused composers, along with others such as Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich, felt otherwise. Even more importantly, listeners have come to terms with the late quartets as the most complex and inspiring music ever written. That they culminate Classicism but move beyond it, that they are inherently Romantic in their deeply personal expression, and that they define Modernism is only a statement of their transcendence and timelessness.

Beethoven suffered a grave illness during the winter of 1824 and spring of 1825 while he was working on Op. 132. While his own problems are reflected in the work, so does it also speak of universal suffering. In Beethoven's own words: "He who divines the secret of my music is delivered from the misery that haunts the world."

The grim intensity of the first movement is mitigated only by the occasional flourishes of the violin. Flourishes though they may be, they are also downward swirls into darkness. We are pulled back and forth between darkness and light, and the pulling itself is ominous. The tempo quickens after the painfully slow opening *Assai sostenuto*, but the mood remains serious despite the occasional shots of sunlight. With all its seriousness, however, the movement is not without its lyricism.

Indeed, Beethoven had not deserted song—or dance—as illustrated in the second movement *Allegro ma non tanto*. Relief comes in this second movement, but it is short-lived. Yet one thing we must not miss in that moment is Beethoven's incredible use of counterpoint. If there is any relief in the movement, it lies in its abstraction more than in what might be perceived as its rustic charm.

Now we are thrust into the heart of the Quartet, the third movement *Molto adagio* over which Beethoven wrote the phrase, "Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Divinity by a Convalescent, in the Lydian mode." The thanksgiving is one for a temporary return of good health. The Lydian mode is a reference to a Medieval church scale, used in Gregorian chant, which corresponds to the scale of F major without the B flattened. A more vigorous section follows which Beethoven marked *Neue Kraft fühlend* (Feeling of new strength). The movement ends with a return to the slow hymn of thanksgiving, which Beethoven marked to be played *Mit innigster Empfindung* (With the most intimate emotions). If there are what seems to be strangely awkward moments in this movement, they are indeed intentional since Beethoven used them elsewhere in such great works as his final Op. 111 Piano Sonata.

Another relief of tension comes with the fourth movement march, a technique Brahms would later use. The march is left unfinished, and we are thrust, without pause, back into a minor key and into the powerful last movement. Odd strains of what modern ears might identify as a Russian

Christmas carol are heard over a restless rocking motion that pervades this disturbing movement with its pastiche of musical ideas to which Beethoven somehow brings an astounding unity.

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