

Cypress String Quartet with Amit Peled, cello

Britten, Suite No. 3 for Solo Cello, Op.87

Edward Benjamin Britten was an English composer, conductor, and pianist. Showing prodigious talent from an early age, he composed his *Quatre Chansons françaises* for soprano and orchestra at the age of fourteen. Britten first came to public attention with the a cappella choral work, *A Boy Was Born*. With the premiere of his opera *Peter Grimes* in 1945 he leapt to international fame, and for the next fifteen years he devoted much of his compositional attention to writing operas, several of which now appear regularly on international stages. Britten's interests as a composer were wide-ranging; he produced important music in such varied genres as orchestral, choral, solo vocal (much of it written for the tenor Peter Pears), chamber and instrumental, as well as film music. He also took a great interest in writing music for children and amateur performers, and was considered a fine pianist and conductor. Amit Peled, cellist will talk on the piece he will be performing today, *Suite #3 for Solo Cello, Op. 87*.

Beethoven, Quartet in F Major, Op. 135

The last year of Beethoven's life was difficult on every level. His health was poor, his finances were in shambles and his suspicious and distrustful nature had driven away all but a few friends. This made him cling desperately to his nephew (and adopted son) Karl. In August 1826, Karl attempted suicide, claiming later: "My uncle harassed me so." Amid the chaos, Beethoven composed what was to be his last Quartet, *Opus 135 in F Major*. His third quartet in the key of F (*Op. 18, No. 1 and Op. 59, No. 1* share the key), was written during the two months that Karl was recovering in the hospital. Completed in October 1826, *Opus 135* was written only months after Beethoven's surprising *Quartet in C-sharp minor, Opus 131*. That the two share the same span of time and sprang from the same composer's imagination is mind boggling. After stretching the form of the quartet to its very limits in *Opus 131* (which is in seven movements, played without pause), the *Opus 135 Quartet* is in a new style, or rather, is a return to a more classical aesthetic. The brevity and "normality" of the piece makes it stand apart from the other quartets of Beethoven's late period. Scholars suggest that perhaps he intended *Opus 135* to be the first of a new set of quartets.

The *Quartet in F, Opus 135*, is in a traditional four-movement form, but this is not to say that the piece is uninspired. It is as if Beethoven had distilled quartet writing to its very essence. The first movement (Allegretto) is capricious, while being gently conversational, providing the listener with an entertaining "tug of war". The scherzo movement (Vivace) follows with humor and brilliance, at times wild (in one section the lower three voices repeat a rhythmic figure some 50 times while the first violin interrupts with bursts of what sounds like country fiddling). For the third movement (Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo), Beethoven returns to his beloved variation form, offering a song or hymn, with four variations. The composer's working title while sketching the movement was "*Süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang*" ("Sweet Song of Rest or Peacefulness"). For the finale movement, Beethoven provides us with a riddle as a preface. Above the music, he writes "*Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss*" (The Difficult Resolution or

Decision), and gives us two short examples of music. The first is marked “Grave” and contains the question “*Muss es sein?*” (Must it be?). The second is marked “Allegro” and states not once, but twice: “Es muss sein! Es muss sein!” (It must be! It must be!). What follows is a musical discussion, going back and forth between the two, with the answer “It Must Be!” triumphantly claiming the end. The piece comes to a close with wit and lightheartedness. Scholars have hotly debated Beethoven’s meaning of the opening question and answer, with opinions ranging from discussions of Beethoven using music to debate a range of ideas including (but not limited to): “free will versus destiny”, the laundry bill, the necessity of paying the rent, and the inevitability of death.

Published posthumously and released in August 1827, *Opus 135* is dedicated to Beethoven’s friend Johann Wolfmayer, a musical amateur and wealthy merchant. Beethoven did not live to see the work’s publication or first performance.

Schubert, String Quintet in C Major, D. 956 (Op. 163)

Written two months before Schubert’s death in 1828, the *Quintet in C Major, D. 956*, was likely not heard by the composer in his lifetime. For twenty-five years this masterpiece lay forgotten until it was finally published in 1853. The “Cello Quintet” (as it is often called) was not Schubert’s first attempt at the string quintet form; he wrote an earlier one, titled *Ouverture*, in 1811, for two violins, two violas and cello. For the later Quintet, he instead chose an extra cello to add to the standard string quartet. Perhaps he wanted to avoid direct comparison with Mozart’s masterpieces for Quintet (with viola), which Schubert was known to have studied carefully in 1824.

Schubert lived most of his life in Beethoven’s shadow. A gifted composer, Schubert never heard any of his symphonies performed, and couldn’t afford a piano, often composing using a guitar. To save music paper, he crammed music (to the point of illegibility) into his scores and often worked in bed, as it was the only place to stay warm in the winter. The last year of Schubert’s life was one filled with depression, brought on by the advancing stages of his illness, which would claim his life in November 1828. Yet his String Quintet, with its abundant flow of song-like melody and easy charm, rises above the circumstances of the composer, and is considered a monument of the chamber music repertoire.