

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. MICHAEL FINK
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Beethoven, Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, no. 5

October 29, 1792

Dear Beethoven,

In leaving for Vienna today, you are about to realize a long-cherished desire. The wandering genius of Mozart still grieves for his passing. With Haydn's unquenchable spirit, it has found shelter but no home and longs to find some lasting habitation. Work hard, and the spirit of Mozart's genius will come to you from Haydn's hands.

*Your friend always,
Waldstein*

These words of encouragement, written by young Beethoven's patron in Bonn, were to become prophetic. Beethoven, partly through study with Haydn but mostly through self-study and self-searching, would inherit the mantle of the High Classic Viennese School. But he would also go on to become the most individualistic composer the world had yet known. Within nine years after Waldstein's well-wishes, Beethoven had already made his mark on Vienna by composing music not just in the Haydn/Mozart tradition, but music that also displayed his own bold personality and tendency toward innovation. Beethoven's first published string quartets, brought out as Op. 18 in the year 1801, owed a great deal to the foundations laid by Haydn and Mozart, but these six works (particularly the last three) also formed important stepping stones in the path to his second, mature period.

The first movement of the A Major Quartet shares the congenial spirit of the Septet (Op. 20), which Beethoven was composing at the same time. In this graceful movement, the thematic material is the simplest imaginable, especially the first theme, an ascending scale.

This is the only quartet of Op. 18 to reverse the expected order of inner movements. But there is precedent for this in the quartets of Mozart, notably the Quartet in A Major, K. 464, which Beethoven copied out himself and which became an important model for the present work. This

Menuetto has the character of a *Teutsche*, or German Dance, the forerunner of the *Ländler* and the waltz. The lilting Trio section is one of the most original-sounding passages of the entire work.

As if to balance the first movement, the melodic theme of the third movement is simply a *descending* scale. Each of the variations on this theme is a unique creation, an important example of Beethoven's break with traditional "figural" variations. The hymn-like fourth variation is the only one to touch on minor keys. The galloping fifth variation leads to a finale with its strong reminiscences of the original theme.

The fire and energy of the finale stem from the first theme with its short motives and contrapuntal force. The second theme, in contrasting long notes, is a "lift" from Mozart's K. 464 (first movement development) which has been modified only slightly. The development concentrates on the first theme, however, with only brief references to the Mozart theme. Following the recapitulation, the rhythm seems to stretch out and wind down, bringing to a close what Joseph Kerman called "Beethoven's most imponderable and unruffled quartet."

Bartók, String Quartet No. 2

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) wrote his Second String Quartet over the years 1915-1917, the same period in which he worked on the ballets, *The Wooden Prince* and *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Stylistically, the quartet bears close resemblance to the ballets but with some advances. It formed a closure to Bartók's early music before he plunged into his explorations of the 1920s.

The quartet's slow-fast-slow movement plan runs counter to tradition. Similarly surprising are the occasional forays into bitonality (two keys at once). However, far from being a tentative experiment, the quartet is from every aspect a carefully planned work created during a

period when the composer, forced by World War I to suspend his folk-song collecting, took time to synthesize and reflect.

The first movement is clearly modeled on the sonata-form idea with its exposition-development-recapitulation pattern. However, Bartók's treatment of the form is very personal. Instead of full-blown themes, the composer works with short motives, the atoms of which themes are normally built. Yet he does not wait for his development section for the "working-out," but begins unfolding the opening motives' implications immediately.

The quick middle movement contrasts with those that enclose it in terms of both tempo and style. This folk-inspired movement is a series of dance-like sections and a close relative of Bartók's earlier piano piece *Allegro Barbaro* (1911), which had virtually introduced the world to 20th-century "primitivism." There is a casual rustic ease to Bartók's handling of the instruments throughout this movement.

The *Lento* finale is constructed in a loose chain form influenced, no doubt, by Debussy's music. Each link in the chain is a musical section that is related motivically to the others. Thus, the movement gives the impression of an intense set of variations where no central theme ever appears.

Regarding the quartet as a whole, Bartók biographer-analyst Halsey Stevens sums up the moods of the three movements as "lyrical — dynamic — reflective" and goes on to conclude, "Most of the new elements in the later works are present, in germinal form, in the pages of the Second Quartet."

Ravel, Quartet in F Major

"In the name of all the gods of music, and for my sake, don't alter a note of what you have written." With these words, Claude Debussy succeeded in dissuading Maurice Ravel (1875-

1937) from revising his Quartet in F Major. The work had been premiered in 1904, while Ravel was still a Conservatoire student, and it had met with harsh criticism from conservative musical circles. Even Gabriel Fauré, the dedicatee of the quartet and Ravel’s “dear master,” had suggested that the finale was out of balance with the rest and needed expanding. However, the wishes of Debussy, whose own quartet had been an inspiration to Ravel, prevailed.

Much has been made of similarities between Ravel’s quartet and that of Debussy, written approximately ten years earlier. Both quartets employ cyclic themes: The main theme of the first movement generates melodic materials for the entire work. However, Ravel is much more literal than Debussy in this matter, and the listener can easily recognize permutations of Ravel’s simple, slightly square opening theme. The second movements of both quartets are partly in *pizzicato*, and we can hear modal scales (as opposed to major or minor ones) in both works.

Although their harmonic styles were similar, Ravel was much more of a “classicist” than was Debussy, and the Quartet in F Major is one of the earliest and best examples of that classicism. It achieves balance and unity through expert key and rhythm handling, where the interrelationships of themes and rhythms are crucial. Ravel unifies his quartet with memorable cross-bindings between alternative movements. For example, he derives the third movement thematically from the first. On the other hand, the relationship between Movements II and IV is a rhythmic one: The scherzo-like second movement stresses shifting accents between 6/8 and 3/4 time. The finale picks up the rhythmic game again, but this time the opponents are 5/4 (5/8) and 3/4 time.

Ravel’s quartet was one of his earliest works to appear without a programmatic or literary title, and critics have called it one of his most perfect achievements. However, the composer himself was more modest about it. His autobiography states, “My String Quartet in F Major,

1902-1903, responds to a desire for musical construction, which undoubtedly is inadequately realized but which emerges much more clearly than in my preceding compositions.”