



THE MUSICAL PILGRIM'

*edited by Dr. Arthur Somervell*

Beethoven's Op. 18  
Quartets

*by W. H. Hadow*

8 Quartets

Beethoven, L. J.

H.

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*General Editor*

*Dr. Arthur Somervell*

# Beethoven's Op. 18 Quartets

*By* W. H. HADOW

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON : HUMPHREY MILFORD

1926

**Oxford University Press**

*London Edinburgh Glasgow Copenhagen*

*New York Toronto Melbourne Cape Town*

*Bombay Calcutta Madras Shanghai*

**Humphrey Milford Publisher to the UNIVERSITY**

*Printed in England*

*At the OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS*

*By John Johnson*

*Printer to the University*

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## INTRODUCTION

THE manuscripts of the Op. 18 quartets have been lost, and the information about them is scanty and partly conjectural. It is most probable that they were begun about 1798 (Grove places the date rather earlier): it is certain that they were published by Mollo in 1801; the first three in the early summer, the last three in October. They thus cover the period during which Beethoven was writing the violin sonatas Op. 12, the pianoforte sonatas from the *Pathétique* to the *Pastoral*, the pianoforte concertos in B $\flat$ , C and C minor, the *Septet*, the *First symphony*, *Prometheus* and the *Mount of Olives*.

During this period Beethoven made friends with an old professor—twenty-two years his senior—named Emanuel Aloys Förster, who lived in Vienna and gave composition lessons. Förster, a competent teacher and an adventurous quartet-writer, held twice a week at his house musical parties which were attended by some of the most famous virtuosi of the time: Schuppanzigh who became Beethoven's favourite first violin, Linke the 'cellist, Weiss the greatest viola player in the city, and many others. Beethoven had free access to this house and was a constant visitor: it may be taken as positive that the six quartets were tried here in manuscript and discussed between the composer and the performers. Indeed, we have on this point a tiny but illuminating piece of evidence. On 25 June

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1799, Beethoven gave Amenda a copy of the quartet in F with an affectionate inscription on the first violin part. 'Whenever you play it', he says, 'recall the days that we have spent together.' About a year later he wrote to Amenda: 'Do not give your quartet to anybody because I have greatly changed it, having learned how to write quartets properly.' Whether this implies actual instruction from Förster is uncertain—Beethoven afterwards spoke of him as his 'Alte Meister', and recommended pupils to go to him—in either case we may conclude that the quartets owe something of their present shape to the suggestions and criticisms of the players. This is worth noting because it is commonly asserted that Beethoven was an unreasonably obstinate person who would not take advice from anybody. He assuredly would not take advice from Albrechtsberger, and for good cause; but the same honesty which made him charge half-price for a concerto, 'because it is not my best work', gave him an open mind to artists who really understood the subjects in which he was interested. It may be added that three of them—Schuppanzigh, Weiss, and Linke—played in the regular quartet which produced his later chamber-works at the palace of Prince Rasoumovsky.

There is a letter to Hoffmeister of Leipsic (the forerunner of Peters), dated 15 December 1800, in which Beethoven, speaking of the Septet, says, 'All the parts are obbligati', and adds the characteristic phrase, 'I cannot write anything not obbligato.' To appreciate the full importance of this it is necessary to go back a little way in the history of chamber music. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the level of skill in string playing was still very low: Corelli was regarded as the climax of sheer difficulty, and the

few comparative virtuosi required for their display the position of first violin or violoncello. It is indeed probable that these alone were at all clearly heard. The ears of the patron were not yet attuned to nice distinctions, and so long as there was a recognizable tune at the top and a solid bass at the bottom it did not seem to matter much what happened between them. Bach, no doubt, would have entirely altered the course of events, but it must be remembered that by the end of the century not a page of Bach's concerted music had been published, and the general standard of the age may almost be illustrated by a rejoinder of the child Mozart, who when warned by his father not to come and spoil the quartet-party, replied with weeping tears, 'But, papa, one doesn't need to have learned the violin in order to play a second-violin part.' From the beginning of the Viennese period there was unquestionably a great improvement; both Haydn and Mozart himself advanced nearer and nearer to the ideal of a 'quatuor dialogué'; but it is no disrespect to their genius to say that they never wholly attained to it. And of this we may, if we will, find a crucial instance. Haydn's latest quartets were written during the same years as Beethoven's earliest. For melody, for purity, for transparence of style, Haydn's are in their kind unsurpassed: in balance of instruments they seem to belong to an earlier generation than Beethoven. The first violin parts are always brilliant and characteristic, the 'cello parts very often; the intervening voices, though far removed from the supers and chorus-singers of the earlier days, are too frequently contented with the role of the hero's friend or the heroine's confidante. But in Beethoven's Op. 18 the balance is perfect, the interest is distributed with an



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entirely even hand. He has, indeed, less virtuosity than Haydn, though he demands more concentrated intelligence; the steady light which illumines his work is diffused over the whole canvas. And part of the reason may well be that he had at his disposal a complete group of executive artists such as were not gathered together even at Eisenstadt.

Of his constructive power there is little need here to speak: the subject has been abundantly discussed in text-books and critical essays. The two focal points are: one, that he had the greatest constructive genius of any musician who ever lived—perhaps of any artist except Shakespeare; the other, that he entered into the full inheritance of Mozart and Haydn, that he could assume in his hearers a general acquaintance with the forms of the sonata movements, and could therefore treat them with a freedom which would have been impossible to his predecessors. The result is that in all six quartets there is not an otiose or superfluous bar. The themes may differ in value, we shall see later that this is so, but the interweaving of this texture is as perfect as human art can achieve. In later life he touched deeper issues: he never wrote with a more complete mastery of his resources.

Readers who wish to study these quartets with fullest appreciation are strongly recommended to collate them with the rest of Beethoven's early chamber works: with the pianoforte trios, Op. 1 (especially the third), with the violin sonatas, Op. 12, and with the pianoforte sonatas up to Op. 26. Many points, both of style and of structure, will be elucidated by the comparison. For the quartets themselves it is advisable that students, in addition to reading the scores, should hear them whenever occasion can be found; either on the strings, or, if these are not

available, in four-hand pianoforte versions or in the reproductions of the gramophone. All performances should, if possible, be followed score in hand: the 'Miniature' scores are easy to read and are generally accessible.

## NOTE

**EXACT** systems of nomenclature and classification are usually tiresome and occasionally misleading. It must be remembered that the instrumental forms were largely developed by Beethoven, and that they grew under his hand. The coda, for instance, which before his time was often no more than an 'Amen', was sometimes extended by him until it was as long or nearly as long as the rest of the movement put together, and throughout the whole work he claimed and exercised the right of treating his materials with great freedom. But just as it is convenient to divide a play into acts and scenes, or a novel into chapters, so it may be generally useful here to indicate the various architectural plans on which he built the superstructures of Op. 18.

1. **Simple Binary Form**: two clauses of equal or approximately equal length set in exact antithesis. Often, but not always, the first clause modulates away from the tonic key and the second returns to it or maintains it. Examples of this form are the Adagio of the second quartet, the Air for Variations of the fifth and the Trio of the sixth.

2. **Simple Ternary Form**: three clauses of which the third restates the first, with or without modifications, and is separated from it by a clause of contrast. Examples of this form are the Scherzos of the first, second, and sixth quartets, the lyric Allegro of the third and the Minuets of the fourth and fifth.

Some authorities classify these two forms on a different basis ; holding that a movement is Binary if the first clause modulates away from the tonic, and Ternary if it does not. The evidence, part of which is historical, would take too much space to recount here : on the whole it seems more scientific to say that a Binary form is twofold in basis and a Ternary form threefold, and that to this the question of modulation, though important, is subordinate. The common mark of a Ternary form is the reappearance of the principal theme in the tonic after the clause of contrast. To both forms, but more often to the Ternary, Beethoven, when he thinks fit, appends a coda or epilogue.

3. The so-called Sonata-form or First Movement form, used by Beethoven for the first movements of all six quartets, for the slow movement of the first, the scherzando of the fourth, and the finales of the second, third, and fifth. This is the most elaborate of all the structural plans which Beethoven employs : he had a special predilection for it, and it influences his work almost as much as fugal counterpoint does that of Bach. As used in Op. 18 it consists of three main divisions, generally followed by a coda. The first, called the exposition, contains two 'subjects', or musical paragraphs, one in the tonic, the other in a contrasted key, connected by a transitional passage which modulates from one to the other. The second, called the development section, takes at choice any of the themes or melodies presented in the exposition, and weaves them into a fantasia with such varieties of key, modulation, harmony, and the like as the invention of the composer suggests. The third, called the recapitulation, restates the exposition with such changes as are necessary to place the second subject, as well as the first, in the tonic key. The coda sums



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up the whole movement as the envoy of a novel may sum up or finish the plot. Thus, the scheme is as follows :

<i>Exposition.</i>	<i>Development Section.</i>	<i>Recapitulation.</i>	<i>Coda.</i>
1st subject in tonic key. Transition modulating to 2nd subject in contrasted key.	Free handling of themes from exposition, usually with great variety of keys.	1st subject in tonic. Transition altered so as to lead to 2nd subject in tonic.	Farewell treatment of any themes on which Beethoven wishes to end.

In some first movements, but not in those of Op. 18, the exposition is preceded by an introduction or prologue in slow time. See, however, the finale of No. 6.

Four points may be noted for consideration :

(a) Beethoven always makes the second subject longer than the first. As the tonic key is to prevail in the recapitulation it is advisable, on grounds of balance, that the contrasted key should in the exposition occupy the chief place.

(b) The exposition is customarily repeated. To this there is no parallel in any other art : one cannot, for example, imagine a play in which the first act is presented twice over. The reason, which again is partly historical, contains a real point of musical structure. It is necessary to the understanding of the plot that the hearer should clearly recognize the various themes as they are treated in the development section ; he is helped in doing this if he has already heard them twice. But, as hearers have progressed in musical experience the need for this has diminished, and in many later works, notably those of the present day, the repeat has been discontinued.

(c) The crucial place in the plot is that at which the development section passes into the recapitulation; at which, in other words, the knot of adventure is resolved and the voyage comes into smooth water. Beethoven always marks this by some special indication, some climax of interest as the *dénouement* approaches, and in each of his successive works he invents a new one.

(d) If any passage is conspicuously absent from the main body of the work we may usually assume that it will appear in the coda. Beethoven has postponed it in order that we may notice its absence and welcome it the more when it comes.

4. The Rondo. The earliest form of Rondo is that of a recurrent melodic stanza, the reappearances of which are separated from each other by episodes in contrasted keys: much as the chorus or burden of a song alternates with the solo verses. Purcell's 'I attempt from love's sickness to fly' is a perfect example of a rondo in this sense. Beethoven after his manner develops this by crossing it with his favourite 'sonata-form', so that the first episode, often introduced by a formal transition, is recapitulated towards the end in the tonic key. His form, therefore, is—(a) principal subject, tonic key, (b) first episode, contrasted key, (c) principal subject, 2nd appearance, tonic key, (d) second episode, new contrasted key, (e) principal subject, 3rd appearance, tonic key, (f) *first episode transposed to tonic key*, (g) principal subject, 4th appearance, tonic key, freely treated and merging into the coda.

Examples of this form are the Finales of Nos. 1, 4, and 6. See also the slow movement of No. 3.

## No. 1 in F Major

SECOND in order of composition: put first in the published order at the recommendation of Schuppanzigh.

### 1. *Allegro con brio.*

One of Beethoven's most notable devices for holding together a complex movement is to open it with a clear distinctive phrase, simple enough to suit a variety of contexts, incisive enough to be easily recognizable in them all, and to recall it at moments of crisis throughout the music. A familiar example is the opening Allegro of the Fifth symphony. Another, in its way even more remarkable, is that of the third pianoforte trio with which last the present movement should be carefully compared. Here the opening phrase, which may, for convenience, be called the 'motto theme', is



Nothing could be simpler, but its crispness, its conciseness, and the little twist of the rhythm make it unforgettable. On it, bandied in dialogue among the four strings, the first subject (bars 1 to 29) is entirely based. From bar 30 to bar 56 follows the transition, first a suave little violin melody with the motto theme in the bass, then a series of modulations, D minor, C major, and (very suddenly) A $\flat$ : the motto

theme discussed by viola and first violin which most ingeniously combines it with the transitional melody: then at bar 50 a flourish of scale passages, drawing up and presenting arms to tell us that the second subject is coming. This piece of ceremonial is really a legacy from Beethoven's predecessors—Mozart was specially fond of it—as the need for ceremonial faded Beethoven laid it aside, or used it only when, as in the pianoforte sonata, Op. 106, he wanted to throw us off the scent. And after all this pageantry the second subject enters so quietly (bar 56) that we hardly know when it has begun: first a dainty tripping figure in C major



divided among the strings, followed by (b) another reminiscence of the motto theme, (c) a rushing scale passage, ending on a full close (d) a new ascending melody in C major—bar 84 onwards—interrupted towards the end by a series of gruff, unexpected chords, (e) a final cadence phrase (notice the 'cello part) leading to the double bar and the repeat.

The development section begins by repeating in A major the flourish with which the exposition ended, and then for the next 48 bars (119 to 167) occupies itself entirely with the motto theme, showing it in new lights, weaving it into new textures, even (bars 139 to 150) playing with its distinctive rhythm. It will be noticed that at the beginning of all this (bar 119) the whole quartet is forcibly and without modulation shifted up a semitone—in this case from A to B $\flat$ . Beethoven often employs this device to give a sense of strangeness, or to arouse expectation, and he always follows it with something of special moment.



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There is another instance in the Trio of this quartet : others in the Finales of the second and third ; others in the first movements of the early pianoforte sonatas, A major, C major, and D major. The development section ends (bars 167 to 179) with a series of running scale passages, through which is piled up an immense dominant seventh chord—like Pelion on Ossa—until with a soaring flight of the first violin the music breaks (bar 179) into the recapitulation. Of this nothing need be said except that the first subject and the transition are both curtailed (compare bars 179–217 with bars 1–56), and that the second subject proceeds, clause by clause in the tonic key. At bar 274 the coda begins with a striding upward passage in crotchets :



which Beethoven at once presses into the service of the motto theme, as he has done with almost everything else. And so, leaving this pertinacious but charming phrase in possession of the field, the coda comes to an end, and with it the movement.

### 2. *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato. D minor.*

Beethoven told Amenda that when he wrote this movement he had in his mind the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is dangerous to lay any emphasis on such statements as this. Even when they are seriously made—and Beethoven was not always serious—they convey no more than a very general hint of very limited application. ‘Music’, as Mr. Heseltine reminds us, ‘cannot be translated into terms of anything other than itself’; and all we can safely say here is that the opening melody is of extraordinary