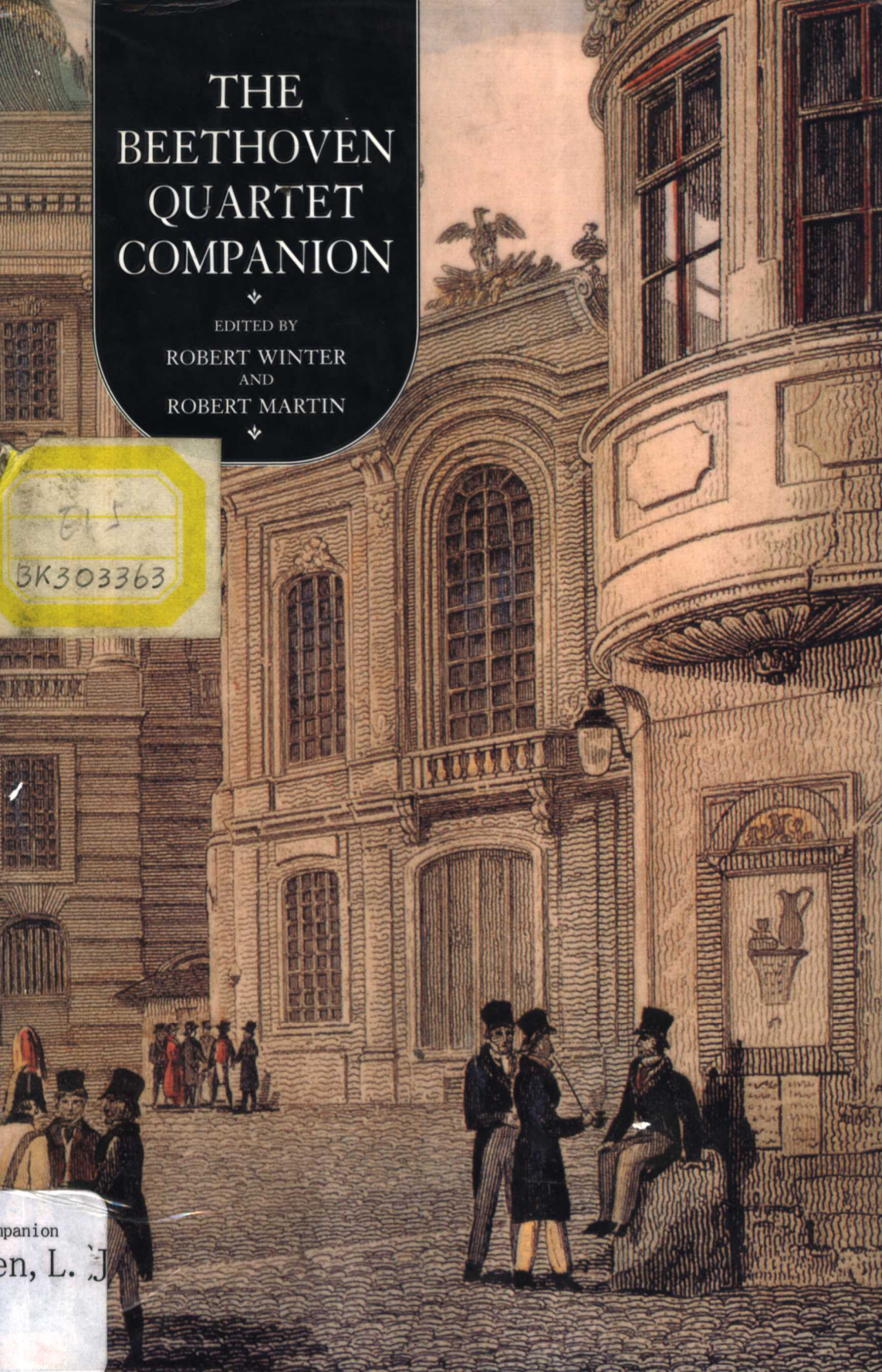


# THE BEETHOVEN QUARTET COMPANION



EDITED BY  
ROBERT WINTER  
AND  
ROBERT MARTIN



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EDITED BY

ROBERT WINTER AND ROBERT MARTIN

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Michael Steinberg's "Notes on the Quartets" are based on his program notes for the San Francisco Symphony, © 1980. A few sentences of the original version survive, and their use here is gratefully acknowledged.

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The four quartet instruments presented to Beethoven by Prince Karl Lichnowsky in 1800. In the mid-nineteenth century the violins were said to be by Giuseppe Guarneri (1718) and Niccolò Amati (1667), the viola by Vincenzo Ruger (1690), and the cello by Andrea Guarneri (1712). More recent research suggests that these attributions were overly generous. (Reproduced by permission of the Beethoven-Archiv, Bonn.)

SAT54/08

*To the memory of our friend and UCLA colleague Montgomery Furth.*

## Acknowledgments

Initial steps toward the publication of this volume began with a 1984 proposal from the Sequoia String Quartet Foundation to the National Endowment for the Humanities. The proposal was funded, and a generous grant of matching funds was committed by the University of California Press. Work stretched over a period far longer than we ever imagined. We gratefully acknowledge the help of Herbert Morris and A. Donald Anderson, presidents of the Sequoia String Quartet Foundation during the relevant period; Ara Guzelimian, who wrote the grant proposal to the NEH; and Doris Kretschmer, editor at the University of California Press, who has been our partner throughout. Finally, we thank each other.

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# Introduction

The seventeen Beethoven string quartets are to chamber music what the plays of Shakespeare are to drama and what the self-portraits of Rembrandt are to portraiture. Our relationship with these masterworks can benefit from a companion—a *vade mecum* (“go with me”), as such books used to be known—for the nonspecialist, offering perspective and guidance. Such a companion should enhance the experience of listening to the quartets in live performance or on recordings. It should also enrich our understanding of the context and significance of the quartets as cultural objects.

These dual purposes—enhancing the listening experience and enriching our understanding of the cultural context—are reflected in the approach we have taken to assembling this companion. To serve the first, we asked Michael Steinberg, formerly critic of the *Boston Globe* and more recently Artistic Advisor of the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra, to write individual essays on each of the quartets. These essays, grouped into three chapters that make up the second part of this book, succeed admirably, we believe, in providing movement-by-movement guideposts for the listener. Steinberg has also contributed a glossary of musical terms that is helpful not only for his essay but for those of the other contributors as well.

The motivating concern connected with the second purpose of our companion was with the society and culture of Beethoven’s time and, to some extent, the context in which the quartets are performed today. We asked for contributions from writers whom we trusted to be both original and accessible, without concern for comprehensiveness or consistency among essays. We favored interdisciplinary perspectives that reflect

the diversity of approaches characteristic of the last twenty years. There is no particular order in which these essays should be read; we hope each reader will find something of interest to begin with and that the threads of connection will lead to the other essays.

Joseph Kerman's essay, "Beethoven Quartet Audiences: Actual, Potential, Ideal," examines in detail one aspect of the reception history of the quartets: to what changing audiences did Beethoven address these works? This apparently simple question opens complex and fascinating issues. For example, Kerman develops a connection between the art-historical notion of "absorption," developed by Michael Fried in connection with certain eighteenth-century painters ("the supreme fiction of the beholder's nonexistence"), and the fact that in certain of Beethoven's late quartets "the sense of audience superfluity is almost palpable."

Robert Winter's essay, "Performing the Beethoven Quartets in Their First Century," brings together information on how and under what circumstances the quartets were performed before the era of sound recordings. We learn of the extent of French influence on those who first performed the quartets and of their mix of partly modern, partly old-fashioned instruments. Through the eyes of three popular nineteenth-century German and American music periodicals, Winter examines the often surprising manner in which the nineteenth century viewed and consumed the quartets. For example, until well after mid-century, string quartet ensembles consisted most frequently of either family groupings or of the principal players from permanent orchestras who came together for a handful of concerts each year.

Maynard Solomon opens his essay by pointing out that nineteenth-century musicians and critics viewed Beethoven as the originator of the romantic movement in music; indeed he was lifted to mystical status as a romantic paradigm. Beginning with the work of the German scholar Arnold Schmitz in the 1920s and culminating in the influential work of Charles Rosen in the 1970s and 1980s, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction, transforming Beethoven into the archetypal classicist. The question, Solomon argues, is not simply how Beethoven should be viewed by historians of culture but how his music is to be heard: the issue "has an important bearing on whether we perceive and perform works such as the quartets primarily as outgrowths of eighteenth-century traditions and performance practices or as auguries of fresh traditions in the process of formation."

Leon Botstein—social historian, conductor, and college president—

has contributed a wide-ranging essay that places the quartets in the context of Viennese society, philosophy, theater, and literature. Connections to other essays in this volume emerge at every turn; there is discussion of the context of the earliest performances (Winter), of the special relationship of audience to chamber music performance (Kerman), of the reception of the quartets and views as to their “place” within the musical scene (Solomon); there is even discussion, in connection with the twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, of expression and meaning in the quartets that intersects with Robert Martin’s discussion of performance and interpretation.

Drawing on his experience as cellist of the Sequoia String Quartet, Robert Martin looks at the quartets from the perspective of the performer, asking what sorts of interpretive decisions are made and on what basis. Martin takes advantage of the circumstance that in chamber music, rather more than in solo or orchestral playing, players are led to verbalize their reasons for musical decisions in order to persuade their colleagues. Martin asks about the relationship between performers, composer, and score; he examines a literalist, a “buried treasure,” and a textual interpretation of this relationship before settling on what he calls a collaborative view.

As a young man Beethoven inherited the highly developed quartet models of Haydn and Mozart. They had devoted many of their finest efforts to string quartet writing, for reasons that went to the heart of the Viennese style. Viennese musicians viewed the members of the violin family as the most subtle of the crafted instruments, capable of challenging the human voice in their powers of expression. String trios were considered less than ideal because only by using multiple stops or through acoustical deception could they replicate four-part chords—the most complex in the Viennese musical vocabulary. The string quintet, mastered especially and unforgettably by Mozart, tilted the intimate balance of voices toward orchestral textures. The string quartet was seen as perfect both expressively and texturally, intimate yet complete. The four performers exemplified the Viennese ideal of civilized discourse, in which one could follow the separate voices with relative ease—more so, for example, than in a string quintet.

To be sure, Beethoven experimented first in Vienna with string trios, a genre in which he was less likely to be compared to Haydn and Mozart. Within a few years he was drawn into a full set of six quartets

(Op. 18) that displayed both their debt to Haydn and Mozart and their originality. However we deal with the issue of Beethoven's "style periods" (addressed in this volume by both Joseph Kerman and Maynard Solomon), the seventeen quartets are in many ways a surer guide to the debate than the sonatas (often used by Beethoven as a proving ground) or the symphonies (whose public character imposed more stylistic limits than chamber music).

String quartet writing was deeply important to Beethoven throughout his career, as we know from many letters, documents, contemporary reviews, eyewitness accounts, and, of course, the music itself. But his return to the medium in the very last years and months of his life testifies movingly to the centrality of the string quartet in his musical and personal identity. Having completed the two largest public works of his career—the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa solemnis*—and having received from the May 1824 premieres critical adulation of the kind that had slackened during the previous decade, Beethoven might have been expected to continue in the public spotlight. He had an almost standing invitation to go to England. There were numerous opera projects to be considered. And we know that in 1822, 1824, and 1825 he made tentative sketches for a "tenth" symphony.

But Beethoven came home to quartet writing, though it offered little potential for income and even less for public acclaim; only the first three of the five late quartets were commissioned, and the money from that commission never materialized. We get some sense of the scope of his preoccupation from the fact that, in 1826, Beethoven needed more than 650 pages of sketches to fashion the C-sharp minor Quartet, Op. 131—more than four times as many as he needed to write out the finished score in its entirety. Indeed, as Joseph Kerman suggests, Beethoven seems to have created these last quartets "without any listener in mind but himself."

Robert Winter & Robert Martin  
Los Angeles  
July 1992



## *Perspectives*



Playing to the twentieth-century concert audience: the Lark String Quartet in a 1993 performance in Weill Recital Hall, the 268-seat chamber music and recital space in Carnegie Hall. (Photo © 1993 Steve J. Sherman.)

# Beethoven Quartet Audiences: Actual, Potential, Ideal

JOSEPH KERMAN

Most of us have known about Beethoven's "three periods" for about as long as we have known *Für Elise* and the Minuet in G. Deep disparities in style and feeling exist across the extent of Beethoven's works, disparities that seem to need explanation, and we cannot read much about Beethoven without learning what critics, biographers, and historians have come up with to answer this need. A main explanatory construct that has served them is the idea of the three style periods, matched to the life-phases of youth, maturity, and age. We cannot read much about Beethoven's string quartets, in particular, without soon meeting up with this idea in a notably tidy version.

Thus Beethoven's earliest essays in the genre, the set of six Quartets Op. 18, can be seen (or can be said) to strain restlessly but not very effectively against the classic norms established by Mozart and Haydn. Composed between 1798 and 1800, their very dates straddle the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as though to symbolize Beethoven's so-called "formative" first period. His next quartets, the three dedicated to Count Razumovsky, were composed only five years later. Yet they seem to inhabit a different world, the world of the *Eroica* Symphony and *Leonore*, compositions that most famously define the second period. Archetypically "third period" is the celebrated group of five late quartets, including the *Grosse Fuge*—the great compositional project that occupied Beethoven for two years just prior to his death in 1827. Two works



hover somewhat less tidily between the last two periods: the “Harp” Quartet in E Flat, Op. 74, and especially the F-minor work that Beethoven called *Quartetto serioso*, Op. 95.

In his recent collection *Beethoven Essays*, Beethoven’s biographer Maynard Solomon subjects the doctrine of the three periods to close and skeptical scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> A threefold categorization of an artist’s life-work was a cliché among nineteenth-century artistic biographers, who applied it just as readily to Michelangelo and Raphael as to Beethoven; and many works by Beethoven resist such triadic categorization—the F-minor quartet is not the only one. Yet the basic framework of the three style periods survives skepticism, Solomon concludes. For in fact many historical factors apart from musical style converge to reinforce it. Among these factors are the significant changes in Beethoven’s inner life, in his fundamental modes of patronage, and indeed in the Viennese zeitgeist at large.

To these can be added, for the purposes of this chapter, developments in the history of the string quartet. The kind of history I have in mind is a sort of reception history, loosely defined: an account of the different audiences to which string quartets were principally directed over the course of Beethoven’s activity.

The first audience, which I call the collegial audience, can be introduced appropriately by Karl Amenda, a name remembered today solely but fondly by aficionados of the Beethoven string quartets.

An enthusiastic violinist about Beethoven’s age, Amenda became a close friend and confidant of the young composer during the few years he spent in Vienna as a fashionable music teacher. He left for good in 1799. In a letter written two years later, Beethoven mentioned a string quartet that he had given to Amenda and asked him not to circulate it. “I have made some drastic alterations. For only now have I learnt how to write quartets; and this you will notice, I fancy, when you receive them.”<sup>2</sup>

The composition in Amenda’s copy has, providentially, survived. The set of players’ parts, in the hand of a professional copyist, bears Beethoven’s affectionate inscription to his friend. The music is appre-

1. Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 116–25.

2. Ludwig van Beethoven to Karl Amenda, in Emily Anderson, ed., *The Letters of Beethoven*, 3 vols. (London, 1961), letter 53.