

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet in E minor, Op.59 No. 2 (1805)

Allegro

Molto adagio (Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento)

Allegretto: Minore - Maggiore - Minore - Maggiore - Minore

Finale Presto

The Op 59 Razumovsky quartets were a revolution in quartet writing. In Joseph Kerman's words "It is probably not too much to say that Op. 59 doomed the amateur string quartet." The conversation between equal players of Haydn, Mozart and even Beethoven in his earlier Op 18 quartets here gives way to "the heroic discourse of the symphony" - and no ordinary symphony at that. The Op 59 quartets were written in 1805-6, a full four years after the Op 18 set but only shortly after the third, "*Eroica*" Symphony (op. 55). The commission was from Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna and a very able second violinist in his own quartet. Its first fiddle was Ignaz Schuppanzigh a friend, inspiration and perhaps also violin teacher to Beethoven. As well as playing with the Count, Schuppanzigh had formed his own professional quartet in 1804 in order to give public quartet concerts - a radical new departure. This accomplished quartet may have encouraged Beethoven to stretch the technical demands on the players to match his more ambitious musical conceptions.

While the first quartet of the set is, like the contemporary *Eroica* Symphony, gloriously expansive, this E minor quartet is, at least in its first movement, terse, full of nervous tension. It opens with two *forte* chords, much like the call to attention at the beginning of some of Haydn's late quartets; then silence; then a pianissimo E minor arpeggio evaporating in semiquavers; silence; then the same in F minor; silence; more of the same in stranger keys and more wandering semiquavers. Where *are* we going? Back to the opening two chords, and now at last the first violin gives a sense of purpose, the semiquavers gather energy, and the movement is off. This sense of dislocation at the beginning of a work returns in a more extreme form in the *Andante* opening of the third of Razumovsky set.

An almost unique feature of the Op 59 no 2 quartet among Beethoven's major works is that all the movements have the same keynote, in this case E. The E major slow movement is one of Beethoven's finest. In contrast to the nervousness of the first movement, all is serene in this *molto adagio* that is to be played with 'lots of feeling'. Its unhurried theme is soon given a pulse by a persistent dotted heart-beat derived from the dotted figure in the third bar (*). It briefly hardens into a double dotted figure before giving way to sublimely soaring triplets.



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The third movement is unusual in that Beethoven calls for a triple-decker rather the usual two-slice sandwich. The start of the *Minore* is a permutation of the E minor arpeggio of the first movement's opening bars. The *Maggiore* Trio is based, as a concession to Razumovsky, on a Russian theme:

Glory to the Sun had appeared in a collection put together by the



polymath Nikolay Lvov and Ivan Prach. The tune was later used by Moussorgsky in *Boris Godunov* and also by Rachmaninov.

The last movement transforms the heart-beat of the slow movement into a boisterous canter. It starts in C major and flirts for 50-odd bars with a move into its nominal key of E

minor before finally landing on it - a piquant addition to the large helping of E that the quartet presents us with. The canter turns into a gallop just before the end of this good-humoured movement.