

## Programme notes by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet Op 59 No 3 in C (1805)

*Introduzione: Andante con moto. Allegro vivace*

*Andante con moto quasi Allegretto*

*Menuetto. Grazioso*

*Allegro molto*

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.

The slow introduction of the third of the Op 59 quartets is extraordinary, not only to listen to but also to play. Rebecca Clarke: "*One hardly dares breathe, and can almost see the internal counting of one's companions floating like some astral shape above them. It is such a trying thing to play – wonderful as it is – that the entry into the Allegro vivace feels exactly like a sigh of relief at gaining solid ground again.*" Its significance is intriguing. Lewis Lockwood points out its harmonic relation to the introduction to Florestan's dungeon scene in *Fidelio*, written a short time earlier, leading Angus Watson to speculate that it expresses Beethoven's deep personal feelings, given his comment in the manuscript "*May your deafness be no more a secret, even in art.*"

Two motifs shape the ensuing *Allegro*: it opens with a simple cadence (illustrated under 1), which after about 40 bars of tentative exploration leads to a joyful main theme as we finally get to the home key of C major (illustrated under 2). Only Beethoven could make such a movement out of these snippets.



Angus Watson feels the *Andante* evokes the stillness of stories retold on long Russian winter evenings - the ticking of the cello's persistent pizzicato interspersed with encouragements to tell it all again. The

charmingly graceful *Menuet* (illustrated) ) contrasts with its assertive *Trio* in which the second violin (written with Razumovsky in mind?) and viola, egged on by the others, lift the semiquaver runs of the

*Menuet* and show just how far they can take them.



The opening phrase of the *Menuet* is inverted to give the start of the last movement's fugue (illustrated). The viola, fresh from its triumph in the *Trio*, kicks off at speed for 10 bars. Nobody

is to be outdone, especially the first violin, who initiates a string-climbing competition, cheered on by the others. Finally, the second violin transforms the underlying slow



accompanying figure into a lyrical vote of thanks and the party ends in a triumphant last fling.