



NORTHSTAR
RECORDING
by BERT VAN DER WOLF

4 CD-SET



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Late String Quartets

Narratio Quartet

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Johannes Leertouwer violin

Franc Polman violin

Dorothea Vogel viola

Viola de Hoog cello

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

CD 1

String Quartet Op. 95 in F Minor (1810)

Seinem Freunde dem Herrn Hofsekretär Nikolaus Zmeskal v. Domanovecz gewidmet

- | | | |
|------------|--|-------------|
| [1] | I. Allegro con brio | 5:16 |
| [2] | II. Allegretto ma non troppo | 7:38 |
| [3] | III. Allegro assai vivace ma serio | 4:54 |
| [4] | IV. Larghetto espressivo. Allegretto agitato | 5:24 |

String Quartet Op. 127 in E-flat Major (1824/25)

A son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince Nicolas de Galitzin

- | | | |
|------------|--|--------------|
| [5] | I. Maestoso. Allegro | 7:31 |
| [6] | II. Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile | 14:37 |
| [7] | III. Scherzo. Vivace | 7:55 |
| [8] | IV. Finale | 8:07 |

Total time 61:27

CD 2

String Quartet Op. 130 in B-flat Major (1825)

A son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince Nicolas de Galitzin

- | | | |
|------------|---|--------------|
| [1] | I. Adagio ma non troppo. Allegro | 14:19 |
| [2] | II. Presto | 2:19 |
| [3] | III. Poco scherzoso, Andante con moto ma non troppo | 8:23 |
| [4] | IV. Alla Danza tedesca, Allegro assai | 3:20 |
| [5] | V. Cavatina, Adagio molto espressivo | 5:56 |
| [6] | VI. Grande Fugue (Op. 133) | 17:20 |
| | (Overtura. Allegro - Meno mosso e moderato - Allegro - Fuga.
(Allegro) - Meno mosso e moderato - Allegro molto e con brio - Allegro) | |
| [7] | New Finale for String Quartet Op. 130 in B-flat Major (1826) | 10:05 |

Total time 61:48

CD 3

String Quartet Op. 132 in A Minor (1825)

A son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince Nicolas de Galitzin

- | | | |
|------------|--|--------------|
| [1] | I. Assai sostenuto. Tempo Allegro | 11:02 |
| [2] | II. Allegro ma non tanto | 9:39 |
| [3] | III. Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit,
in der lydischen Tonart | 16:00 |
| [4] | IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace | 2:36 |
| [5] | V. Allegro appassionato | 8:21 |

Total time 47:42

CD 4

String Quartet Op. 131 in C-sharp Minor (1825/26)

Composé et dédié à son Excellence Monsieur le Baron de Stutterheim

- | | | |
|-----|--|-------|
| [1] | I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo | 6:42 |
| [2] | II. Allegro molto vivace | 3:40 |
| [3] | II. Allegro moderato | 0:50 |
| [4] | IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile / Allegretto /
Adagio ma non troppo e semplice / Allegretto | 16:00 |
| [5] | V. Presto | 5:56 |
| [6] | VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante | 2:18 |
| [7] | VII. Allegro | 7:28 |

String Quartet Op. 135 in F Major (1826)

Composé et dédié à son ami Jean Wolfmeier

- | | | |
|------|---|------|
| [8] | I. Allegretto | 7:18 |
| [9] | II. Vivace | 4:15 |
| [10] | III. Assai lento, cantante e tranquillo | 6:44 |
| [11] | IV. Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß
Grave, ma non troppo tratto / Allegro | 8:13 |

Total time 69:29

2009-2024

15 years of the Narratio Quartet and Beethoven

My colleagues in the Narratio Quartet and I have been immersed in all of Beethoven's string quartets for over fifteen years now. We experience time and again how Beethoven explored and then overcame the limits of the Classical style and the instrumental challenges that were prevalent at the start of the nineteenth century along new pathways.

Opus 95 is a great example of exactly this. Beethoven himself stated in a letter to Sir George Smart, at the time an important musician in England, "The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public."

Each of the five late quartets, from Opus 127 onwards, explores new forms, modulating to remotely distant keys, presenting hitherto unprecedented melodic arches and containing what were, at the time, unusually detailed dynamic instructions; different ways in which Beethoven was tearing himself away from the familiar style of the day. At the time, the Schuppanzigh players encountered these notes with the ink still wet on the parts, had just a few weeks of rehearsal (!) and then gave their premiere performances – quite a different practical approach to what we see nowadays. Beethoven composed these five quartets in a remarkably brief period, between 1824 and 1826, with Opus 131 and 135 not being premiered until after his death. The response to the quartets was generally vehement from audiences and performers alike, although there was no universal agreement.

In *Caecilia, Eine Zeitschrift für die Musikalische Welt* 1828 we can find:

“One believes oneself to be judging the later ones most indulgently if one regards them with consternation, putting off a definite judgment to future times” ... “How often did the Mozart quartets have to be heard and practiced before their value was generally acknowledged? And is it not perhaps this longer and more frequent practice that gives Beethoven’s older music the allegedly decisive preference over the more recent? . . . This much is certain: that for Beethoven’s music, at least his recent music, complete success cannot be expected at the first delivery.”

Opus 127: “In Vienna, very accomplished quartet players are supposed to have abandoned this quartet as all too difficult. Later, however, after they took it up again and studied it, they declared it the most perfect work of this great composer” *Caecilia* 1826

Opus 130: “The first, third, and fifth movements are serious, gloomy, mystical, but also at times bizarre, rough, and capricious; the second and fourth full of mischief, good cheer, and roguishness. Here the great composer, who has seldom known how to find appropriate limits, has expressed himself unusually briefly and convincingly. The repetition of both movements was demanded with stormy applause. But the reviewer does not dare to interpret the sense of the fugal finale; for him it was incomprehensible, like Chinese” *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 1826.

Opus 131:

(description of first encounter with the parts by "a certain friend who is very well known to us")

"He had expected something unusual, indeed strange, but what he now found appeared so motley and irregular, at times so highly singular and arbitrary, that he often did not know what to make of it. The melodies...for the most part completely odd, but deeply gripping, even, perhaps, incisive;Out of all of it, what became truly clear to him and spoke to his heart was so little that he could not put it into words. He believed only that he could surmise more than he understood, that the deep shaft, so troublesome to traverse, was as rich in veins of gold as any that Beethoven had discovered and excavated. *AMZ 1828*

After first publication of Opus 132 and Opus 135:

"The friends of the deceased Beethoven receive here two quartets that will be welcome to them. One finds here the same difficult harmonies, the same singular leaps and the same attractive passages as in the other last works of this master. We do not need to point out these features more closely; whoever is not a stranger in the musical world recognizes them and knows what he has to expect here. It is to be hoped that a time will one day come when judgments about Beethoven are more secure and more settled. We do not want to repeat here what has already very often been said, particularly recently, for and against his works. One may judge as one wants; it is always an established truth that Beethoven is a great star in the musical heaven, whose works we must study with all diligence" *AMZ 1828*

Now, of course, we are twenty-first-century musicians and you are a twenty-first-century audience. Beethoven and his quartets still keep us occupied. For us as a quartet, they could even be described as our *raison d'être*. The music is still, or once again?, "für Kenner und Liebhaber». The very existence of this music that is not "for the millions" is under threat and depends on the devotion of musicians and audiences, in an indissoluble bond. What we hear has been enriched by the passing of two centuries and the gaining of wider experience. Progress indeed, might be your first thought, but perhaps we have also lost something along the way? The ability to feel how groundbreaking and visionary this music was in those days.

My colleagues and I feel that using instruments that are comparable to those of the time and actively engaging with nineteenth-century tools of expression has helped us enormously in getting somewhat closer to the surprise, the bewilderment and the rapture that the musicians in Schuppanzigh's quartet must have felt when they first came face to face with the newest and most innovative chamber music of the day.

Viola de Hoog, 2025



Working with 19th-century expressive tools in Beethoven's string quartets

Tempo

Research has demonstrated that the 19th century concept of tempo was much more flexible than the stricter adherence to metronome markings that became common in the 20th century would suggest. Composers such as Beethoven would have expected un-prescribed modifications of tempo and certainly also of rhythm, from performers playing their music.

In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that such modifications were an important and integral part of the revered 'German style', which was championed by Louis Spohr and Joseph Joachim. With the Narratio Quartet, we have experimented extensively with flexible tempo and rhythm. Once we had abandoned the rule of keeping a steady tempo throughout, we shaped our idea of what 19th-century flexibility might have sounded like in performance, largely based on our intuition. After all, we are not trying to recreate a historical truth, but we are trying to use 19th century expressive tools to perform as 21st century musicians for a 21st century audience. It has been striking for us to experience that ideas of flexibility of tempo and rhythm can be applied, not only in the revolutionary later quartets, but also in Beethoven's Opus 18, generally considered to be more classical or *Haydnesque*.

Vibrato

In the violin methods by Spohr (1833) and Joachim/Moser (1905), vibrato is described as an ornament, to be applied only in special circumstances, not - as is common today - as an omnipresent element in sound production on stringed instruments.

There is much evidence to suggest that vibrato was used as an expressive tool to embellish individual notes in melody lines or to colour specific passages or themes. Furthermore, the use of vibrato was often connected to *sforzati*, accents or expressive signs, such as hairpins (< >) or the term 'dolce' in the score. Although it is clear (if only from the many warnings against it) that over the course of the 19th century, vibrato became more and more prominent, we feel as a quartet that much can be gained from using it sparsely. Not only does this create possibilities to highlight certain passages or notes, contrasting them to the ones without vibrato, but it also creates a transparent sound in which the harmonic tensions and resolutions can be felt very clearly. Finally, we think that the harnessed powerful intense vibrato sound, is not always helpful in portraying more delicate and fragile ideas, which seem to constitute such an important and beautiful part of Beethoven's quartets, the early ones as much as the later ones.

Portamento

Portamento is described in the violin methods of the 19th century as the most important expressive tool for string players, enabling them to imitate the human voice. Indeed, portamento is mentioned by Spohr and Joachim, before they discuss vibrato.



Bert van der Wolf-Oude Avenhuis

Over the course of the 20th century, as musicians began more and more to strive for a literal and precise representation of the printed score, portamento became less and less prominent. After all, it is very rarely marked in the score by composers and it takes place 'in between the printed notes.' The use of portamento can soften the rhythmic and melodic contours of the music.

Just like vibrato, portamento was a hotly discussed topic in the 19th century. Some were accused of applying it too often others of not using it sufficiently. We will never know how exactly it was applied in the German tradition of the era before truthful audio recording. For us in the Narratio quartet, experimenting with portamento has opened our ears to different ways of emphasising tension and relaxation in intervals, as well as the harmonic ebb and flow. We realise that it is an acquired taste, but we are strengthened by Beethoven's enthusiasm for Domenico Dragonetti's (1763-1830) portamento playing. Cipriani Potter, who was on friendly terms with Beethoven, writes that Dragonetti's bass playing 'led him (Beethoven) to imagine [...] those slidings upon one string, which import so beautiful and spiritual a character to his chamber music'. Furthermore the violinist Ignace Schuppanzigh, who was such an important partner of Beethoven in premiering and (even in composing) the quartets is reported to have used slides (portamenti) extensively.

Johannes Leertouwer



Narratio Quartet

The narrative of the Amsterdam based Narratio Quartet began in 2009 when it was invited to perform Beethoven's last five string quartets on five consecutive nights at the Early Music Festival Utrecht. It is precisely these late Beethoven quartets which are rarely played on period instruments, using gut strings and 19th-century bows. Since then the quartet has worked backwards and here presents the complete cycle of Beethoven quartets.

The name "Narratio" refers to the art of rhetoric and illustrates the quartet's focus on storytelling and interaction between the musicians and also between the quartet and the audience. Their repertoire has expanded to the later 19th century with Brahms, Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn.

The musicians

Johannes Leertouwer performs as a soloist, chamber music player and conductor. For many years he was concertmaster of Anima Eterna and the Netherlands Bach Society. He is artistic director and conductor of the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht and violinist of Ensemble Schönbrunn since its foundation. He is a professor of Historically Informed Performance Practice at Seoul National University and works as a guest conductor and chamber music coach at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. He obtained his doctorate in 2023 from the University of Leiden on research into the performance practice of orchestral repertoire by Johannes Brahms.

Franco Polman is a violinist in the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century and has played in prestigious baroque orchestras such as Musica Antiqua Köln and Les Musiciens du Louvre. He is active in several chamber music ensembles. Polman plays on a number of Amsterdam violins from the seventeenth century, built by Hendrik Jacobs, Pieter Rombouts en Johannes Theodorus Cuypers.

Dorothea Vogel studied in Switzerland, the USA and London, where she has lived since her studies. She was violist of the Allegri Quartet for 20 years and is a member of the Primrose Piano Quartet. She also performs with the English baroque ensemble The Kings Consort. Dorothea teaches at the Royal Welsh College in Cardiff.

Viola de Hoog is a versatile musician. Her international career takes place in the world of early music, but for 20 years she also travelled all over the world as a member of the renowned Dutch Schönberg Quartet. She is cellist of Ensemble Schönbrunn, principal cellist of the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht and The Kings Consort. Viola has been professor of baroque cello, cello and chamber music at the conservatories of Amsterdam, Utrecht and Bremen since 1990.

Johannes Leertouwer

violin: Antonius et Hieronymus Fr. Amati, Cremona 1619

bow: collaboration John Dodd and Thomas Tubbs, ca. 1820

Franc Polman

violins:

Pieter Rombouts, Amsterdam ca. 1710 (Op. 95, 130, 133)

Johannes Theodorus Cuypers, Den Haag ca. 1790 (Op. 127, 131, 132, 135)

bow: John Dodd, London ca. 1800

Dorothea Vogel

viola: Ludovico Rastelli, Genoa, ca. 1800

Bow: Nicolas Joseph Harmand, Mirecourt ca. 1825

Viola de Hoog

cello: Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, Milan ca. 1750,

on loan from the Dutch Musical Instruments Foundation

bow: François Lupot, Paris ca. 1815

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Early String Quartets

Narratio Quartet



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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Middle String Quartets

Narratio Quartet

This recording was produced with the use of Sonodore microphones, Avalon Acoustic & Musikelectronic Geithain monitoring, Siltech Mono-Crystal cabling and dCS - & Merging Technologies converters.



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RECORDING**
by **BERT VAN DER WOLF**



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