

Beethoven Opus 18 No. 6 in B flat Major
Allegro con brio
Adagio ma non troppo
Scherzo
La Malinconia, Adagio - Allegretto quasi Allegro

In 18th century Europe, the key avenue open to composers such as Beethoven was to secure and nurture the patronage of a noble family, and in the year 1798, it was one particular patronage that would turn out to provide the turning point for Beethoven's compositional life. He had moved to Vienna eight years previously to study with the renowned Franz Joseph Haydn, whose beloved reputation as "father of the string quartet" created a catalogue of ever-ingenious string quartets which held the bench-mark for all composers following in his footsteps. The awe of Haydn hung heavily on Beethoven's shoulders. Furthermore, contemporaries such as Mozart had, in his short life, paid worthy homage to Haydn and as Beethoven left his hometown of Bonn for Vienna he hoped, "through unremitting diligence [to] receive the spirit of Mozart at the hands of Haydn" (Carl Czerny). With knowledge of this awe, it is hard to digest that Beethoven's time with Haydn was frustrating and deemed fruitless. It can therefore be understood that this reverence mixed with disenchantment created a trepidation of tackling the one medium held so highly in regard: the string quartet. However, in 1798 Count Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz commissioned a set of six string quartets and Beethoven began the journey that would be the gateway to his string quartet oeuvre.

The 1st movement - *Allegro con brio* - opens as if bursting on the scene. The key of B flat Major provides a warm tonal home but it is instantly propelled into a joyous melody by the arpeggiated theme in the 1st violin, fueled forward by bustling quavers in the 2nd violin and bouncing crotchets played by the viola. Out of all the Op.18 quartets, this opening movement is perhaps most in line with Haydn's style of unbridled joy and humour. Comparing this to the openings of earlier quartets in the set where the recognisable pedantic side of Beethoven is more prevalent: Op.18 No.1 (with its stoic repetitive tonal and rhythmic unison) or No.4 (where the C minor key sets up a neuroticism in the music) it is noticeable that by the time Beethoven had reached this work, the last in the set, he was finding confidence and pleasure in the medium. It is documented that over the course of the two years it took to complete the set, many drafts ensued before they were finally presented to Count Lobkowitz. Beethoven even wrote to his friend Karl Amenda "Be sure not to hand on to anybody your quartet, in which I have made some drastic alterations. For only now have I learnt to write quartets". The jubilant character of this 1st movement proceeds through the exposition, where it is eventually met with a majestic 2nd subject in the dominant key of F Major. It is manipulated through harmony from stately to lofty, reticent, introspective and even hopeful. The gamut of emotions experienced in these very few bars can be argued to correlate to the historical accounts of drafts and failures, redrafts and successes which make up Beethoven's experience of composing these works.

An important element to further follow in this movement is the 4-note semiquaver turn which pops up throughout. This decoration almost brings an element of joyous circus music to the movement. However, over time Beethoven manipulates it to alter its integral flamboyancy. For example, at the start of the Development the entire quartet play it in unison where the rustic feel of that texture essentially brings the turn down to earth. Furthermore, in the Recapitulation, one can hear the turns in quick succession in the violins and viola - almost like a flurry of birdsong. Scalic quaver runs, unchained from its accompaniment role at the start, provide a crucial developmental structure passed around the entire quartet, culminating in a unison wave of quavers that ultimately results in a surprising rest on two pairs of prayerful perfect 5ths. The silence that follows compounds the surprise, considering the bustling that has come before and the recapitulation the listener is in store for - it is the eye in this blithe storm. Perhaps this hits on the greatest overall theme to follow through this quartet: the juxtaposition of musical characters.

The 2nd movement is no exception to this rule. The veneer of E flat Major brings with it the tonal connotations of stability and steadfastness. The 1st violin melody sings simple couplets of semiquavers before blossoming into a more decorated tune in the 2nd half of the phrase. Marked by reassuring chords from the 2nd violin, viola and cello, the opening music has an air that encourages that everything will be all right. Historically, E flat Major was used by composers to imply heroism and Beethoven would certainly

go on to famously give his *Eroica* Symphony the E flat Major sound world. Here though, it is fair to wonder if he also drew inspiration from his admiration for Mozart. E flat for Mozart was a religious key tied to his Freemasonry and the often intently introspective music of this movement can't help to raise the thought that rather than music to a bombastic hero, we have music to accompany a more personal internal soliloquy battling peace tainted with struggle. To illustrate this juxtaposition of feelings, Beethoven makes use of interspersing the aria-like theme with sparsely textured chromaticism that winds its way like a niggling fear through the phrases. Moments of silence heighten the effect, but Beethoven always uses the E flat melody, like a gentle hero, to provide reassurance to dispel the internal qualms of the music.

As a complete contrast, the 3rd movement could not be more bombastic. If the first two movements were looking back in terms of their inspiration, this *Scherzo* could not be more radical for its time. Beethoven throws caution to the wind and eccentrically pits time signatures against themselves to create a masterpiece in syncopation. The dichotomy of 2 against 3 and 3 against 2 within the intricate texture of each instrument's line, in a work essentially marked in 3/4, creates an outlandish movement. Like the movements before there is juxtaposition, but in this case, it is found rhythmically - the 2-different time signatures work with and against each other to create both chaos and beauty. A short mercurial trio provides respite from the rhythmic battle, and allows the 1st violin to show off an effervescent melody accompanied by smooth and languid harmonies from the cello, viola and 2nd violin before launching back into syncopated frenzy. This is an abstract movement, certainly showing Beethoven challenge preconceptions and begin to push the limits of the medium.

Finally, if there was one movement to perfectly encapsulate the entire quartet's dialogue with juxtaposition, the 4th movement is it. Beginning as a hymn-like prayer shared by the violins and viola there is an integral stillness. However, the title given to this movement is *La Malinconia* and the air of apprehension and foreboding that comes with this term increases and releases constantly. The instruction above this movement is *Questo pezzo si deve trattare colla più gran delicatezza* which is an imploring from Beethoven to play this piece with the greatest of delicacy. Through dissonance and alternating, grace-note decorated *sforzando* chords, Beethoven carefully paces the build-up of what looks to be a musical storm. However, these musical rumbles accumulate to another silent 'eye in the storm' where the listener is surprisingly greeted with the fairest of weather in the form of a gentle Viennese-inspired dance. The sophisticated class of the Viennese dance cuts loose on a number of occasions into a country dance. This is often marked by the off-beat quaver chords played by the 2nd violin and viola. This sliding scale allows the movement to traverse from polished ballroom floors (so familiar to the commissioner of this work) but also lets the listener foray into a rustic pastoral scene. Further to navigating earthly dance settings, Beethoven also intersperses the heavenly by also interjecting reminiscent snippets of the homophonic *Malinconia* prayers, thus ensuring that the juxtaposition of this world and the next are laid side-by-side. Whether the juxtaposition contrasts or compliments is up to the listener, but what is certain, is that in creating this work, Beethoven laid bare the inner workings of his awe, ambitions and qualms on the page to start his wonderful journey composing some of the most pivotal string quartets of all time.