

## Modigliani Quartet

### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet in F major, Op.135 (1826)

*Allegretto*

*Vivace*

*Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo — Più lento — Tempo I*

*Grave, ma non troppo tratto — Allegro — Grave, ma non troppo tratto — Allegro*

The stimulus for Beethoven to return, after 12 years, to composing string quartets was a commission in November 1822 from Prince Galitzin for “1, 2 or 3 quartets”. Had it not been for the intervention of Karl Zeuner, the viola player in Galitzin's own quartet, the commission would have gone to Weber, whose recent opera *Der Freischütz* Galitzin admired. Beethoven fulfilled the commission in November 1825 with the three increasingly complex quartets Op 127 (4 movements), Op 132 (5 movements) and Op 130 (6 movements ending in the *Grosse Fugue*). He continued to write, finishing the seven-movement C# minor quartet Op 131 in August 1826. He then immediately began work on today's F major quartet Op 135, which is dedicated to his good friend and amateur musician Johann Wolfmayer. Beethoven had intended to dedicate Op 131 to Wolfmayer but at the last minute switched to Baron von Stutterheim in gratitude for his mercifully securing a regimental position for Karl, Beethoven's suicidal nephew and ward.

This F major quartet is altogether different from the long and complex works that preceded it, but no less lacking in creative energy. Its compactness is reminiscent of the intense F minor *Quartetto Serioso* Op 95 which the Castalian played at the beginning of this season. But now, the opening mood is capriciously quirky. The viola's Eeyore-like, opening glumness raises a giggle in the first violin; another grumble from the viola, and a 'you can't be serious' from both violins. The viola then cheers up with a rising figure to the cello's tripping pizzicato and the violins agree that that is the way to go. We are soon introduced to two more ideas: a more solemn thought on a falling crotchet figure in octaves and an altogether happier figure in moving semiquavers.

Allegretto

The scherzo opens with complex cross-rhythms between the instruments (where is the downbeat?) as the violin moves in simple steps A-G-F-G-A-G-F, with the cello in contrary motion. An unexpected Eb stops everyone in their tracks. What has happened? Where are we going? False alarm! Just slide up a semitone, and lead back to F as if nothing had happened. The trio section starts innocuously with ascending scales against a simple repeated accompaniment, but the first violin keeps on going high, and ominously having to drop back to earth. The music then turns into a forerunner of the Rite of Spring. The first violin goes mad, fortissimo, with wild leaps, while the other instruments beat out a threateningly insistent pianissimo rhythm. The keys abruptly change from F to G to A – the steps of the initial scherzo theme. The leaps eventually run out of energy, and we are expertly led back to the relatively reassuring world of the scherzo.

The viola starts the slow movement on a simple *piano* F, the tonic of our home key. But as the other instruments build up a soft, warm chord, the F turns out to be the third of the remote key of Db.

Lento assai, cantate e tranquillo

What follows is, even in the context of the late quartets, one of Beethoven's most heartfelt movements. The serene, hymn-like melody is made up of simple steps, like the opening of the scherzo, but transports us into an altogether different world. After twenty or so bars, the music undergoes an abrupt change in tempo, mood and key. Painfully slow, enervated, this first variation, in C# minor, is as despairing as anything in Shostakovich. The mood, thankfully, lifts as the third variation returns to the original key and tempo. In the last variation, a reassuring lullaby, the first violin quietly comments on the theme over a gently rocking accompaniment.

The last movement has the following portentous heading:

**Der schwer gefasste Entschluss**

<p><b>Grave</b></p>  <p>Muss es sein?</p>	<p><b>Allegro</b></p>  <p>Es muss sein!                      Es muss sein!</p>
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[ The hard-to-make decision. "Must it be?" "It must be!" ]

Although this heading can easily be endowed with much existential significance, its origins, at least, are financial (as Michael Steinberg points out in *"The Beethoven Quartet Companion"*). It was the habitual dialogue between Beethoven (bass clef) and 'Frau Schnapps' (treble clef) when she requested her housekeeping money. It later arose in a conversation between two of Beethoven's acquaintances Holta and Dembscher. Beethoven would not provide Dembscher with the parts to his quartet Op 130 because Dembscher had not paid the subscription to attend its recent performance by the Schuppanzigh quartet. Holta suggested that Dembscher pay Schuppanzigh the subscription fee whereupon Dembscher asked "Muss es Sein?" Beethoven was amused and wrote a brief, comic 4-part canon to the words "Es muss sein! Ja, ja, ja. Heraus mit dembeutel" [It must be! Yes. Out with your purse!]. This canon provides the *Allegro* theme illustrated above and its inversion the preceding *Grave*. Beethoven later wrote to his publisher: "You see what an unhappy man I am, not only that [this quartet] was difficult to write because I was thinking of something else much bigger, but because I had promised it to you and needed the money; and that it came hard you can gather from the 'it must be'." So perhaps, "it must be the last movement, since I need the money".

## Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) String Quartet in F (1903)

*Moderato très doux*

*Assez vif-Très rythmé*

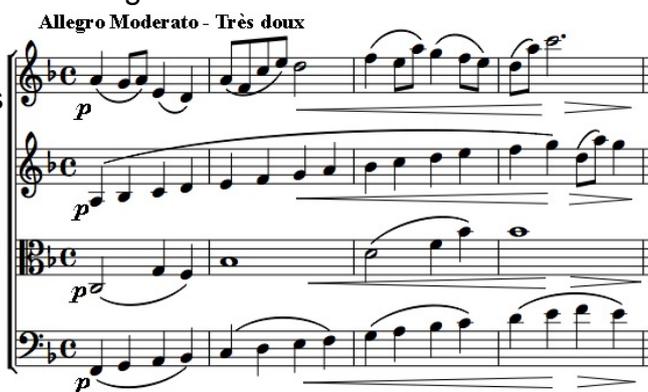
*Très lent*

*Vif et agité*

Ravel's only string quartet dates from 1902-3 while he was still (aged 28) a student at the Paris Conservatoire. It was dedicated to his teacher Fauré and the first movement was submitted to the annual composition contest at the Conservatoire. The contest's judges rejected Ravel's work, and he was expelled for the third and last time. Fauré was more appreciative, though he did not like the last movement: "*stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure.*" Debussy was more prescient: "*In the name of the gods of Music and for my sake personally, do not touch a note of what you have written.*" First performed in 1904, the quartet was not published until 1910 after Ravel had in fact made some changes. Quite what these changes were, we don't know, since the original score is lost.

The opening is one of the most memorable in the quartet literature, transporting at least this listener to the balmy warmth of a French summer. The cello and second violin play a simple rising scale an octave and a third apart, while the viola with another rising figure fills out the harmonies to the first violin's simple tune. In the next four bars the three lower parts just go down a scale. But the overall effect? Magic!

Allegro Moderato - Très doux



The musical score shows the first four bars of the opening. The first violin part has a simple melody. The second violin, viola, cello, and double bass parts play scales. Dynamics are marked 'p'.

The quartet has great thematic unity, with the two main themes of the first movement returning in various guises in the other three. But the treatment of the material is wonderfully varied – rhythmically, harmonically and in tone-colour. Notice particularly the second theme in the first movement with the first violin and viola two octaves apart (*illustrated*); the exciting pizzicato cross-rhythms of the second movement and the complex 5-beat rhythms of the last.



The musical score shows the second theme. The first violin and viola play the second theme two octaves apart. Dynamics are marked 'pp très expr.' and 'pizz.'.