



The string quartets of Beethoven

Showcase 1 (text by Prof. Emil Platen)

Composing quartets as an obligation

As a young man, Beethoven approached the string quartet with the greatest respect. Initially he explored this “sort of sonata for four string instruments”, which had been turned by Haydn and Mozart into the archetype of chamber music, through the related genre of string trios – two serenades (op. 3 and op. 8) and three demanding works (op. 9 nos. 1-3). He then tested the expansion into a full score by re-arranging an early brass octet for five string instruments (op. 4) and studied closely his role models Haydn and Mozart, before setting out to prove himself in the “noblest form of chamber music”.

Beethoven took the word “model” fairly literally as being a clear prototype of a music work of art, in so far as he visualised and wrote down its sound structures. He copied examples of existing works in the form of full scores in order to get a better understanding of the individual elements of sound and structure. The Beethoven House possesses two such studies: the copy of Joseph Haydn’s exemplary quartet in E-flat major op. 33 no. 2, and the copy on display here of Mozart’s string quartet in G major KV 387 from the series of six works dedicated to Haydn. It is open at the page showing the last movement with its fugued beginning, which, albeit many years later, undoubtedly had an influence on the composition of the finale in Beethoven’s quartet in C major op. 59 no. 3. He cannot have copied directly from Mozart’s handwritten score, displayed in facsimile beside it, because this was at the time (the end of the 18th century) still in the possession of Mozart’s widow Konstanze. Beethoven presumably had to compile his score from printed single parts.



Beethoven's copy of Mozart's KV 387

Further evidence of the importance of these role models is furnished by Beethoven’s quartet op. 18 no. 5, which is not only written in the same key, A major, as Mozart’s KV 464. Beethoven naturally did not compose a schoolboyish copy of Mozart’s masterpiece, but details nevertheless show clearly that he gained inspiration for his quartet in A major from the many genial compositional ideas.



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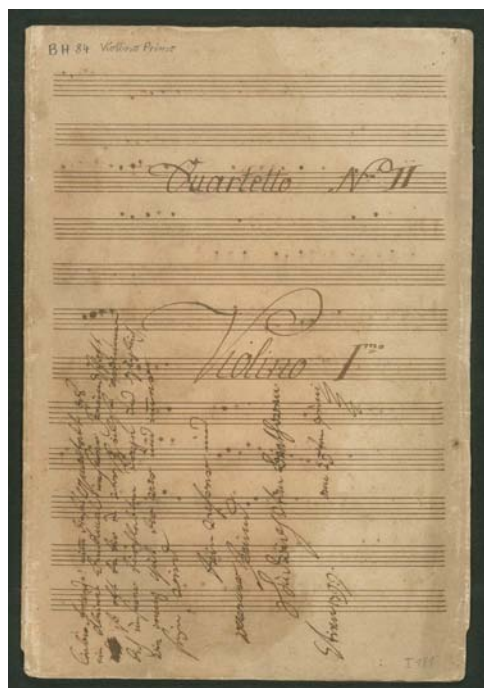
Showcase 2 (text by Prof. Emil Platen)

**“knowing as I now do how really to write a quartet” –
both versions of the string quartet in F major from op. 18**

Beethoven’s painstaking preparation led to his opus 18, which in accordance with the conventions of the genre was made up of six pieces – five in major keys and one in a minor key. He was able to try the works out in the palace of Prince Lichnowsky, his first major patron, together with the prince’s private house quartet, which included the young Ignaz Schuppanzigh, later to become the first violin of his “personal quartet”.

Presumably a result of one such try-out was the radical rearrangement of the quartet in F major, which is documented in an early version in single parts. Beethoven had given this copy as a farewell present to his friend Carl Amenda on 25th June 1799, with a warm-hearted dedication on the cover:

“Dear Amenda, take this quartet as a small monument to our freindship, and whenever you play it, remember the days we spent together and, at the same time, how well you felt and always will, your true and warm friend Ludwig van Beethoven”.



Beethoven’s dedication on the copy for Amenda

But two years later, when Opus 18 was published, he wrote to his friend on 1st July 1801 in the postscript of a very emotional letter (in which he made reference to his fears concerning his “declining hearing”):

“[. . .] do not give your quartet to anyone, for I have changed it a lot, knowing as I now do how really to write a quartet, which you will see when you receive it” (on display in the showcase).

The displayed examples of the first violin part give an indication of the extensive alterations which Beethoven made just in the development section of the first movement.



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Showcases 3 and 4 (text by Nicole Kämpken)

The “Rasumowsky Quartets” op. 59

Beethoven composed the three string quartets in F major, E minor and C major in 1806. He dedicated them to Andreas Kyrillowitsch Count Rasumowsky, the Russian ambassador at the Viennese court, a passionate musician who himself played the violin. Even if the compositions were not actually commissioned works, we can assume that the wealthy patron provided a financial reward in return for the dedication. Of even greater interest to Beethoven would however have been the chance to try-out and perform the pieces with the highly rated Schuppanzigh Quartet. In 1808 the Count persuaded the quartet under first violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, with Louis Sina (violin), Franz Weiss (viola) and Joseph Linke (cello), to accept a guaranteed lifelong remuneration in return for becoming his personal musicians. Occasionally Rasumowsky himself played the second violin. A contemporary wrote, “As is well known, in the Duke’s house Beethoven was the centre of attention, as it were; every one of his compositions was tried out there, fresh out of the pan and performed, as he said himself, perfectly accurately and exactly as he wanted it, and in absolutely no other way”. In addition to the concerts in the palace the quartet continued to perform the cycles of public chamber music concerts which had been established by Schuppanzigh, thus helping to make Beethoven’s works better known. As young men the musicians had played together with a slightly different line-up (with Nikolaus Kraft on cello) under the name of “Lichnowsky Quartet” in the palace of Prince Lichnowsky – a central point for music enthusiasts among the Viennese aristocracy and a meeting place for famous composers and virtuosi. In those days they worked very closely with the young Beethoven, who was a protégé of the prince, and they also practised and performed his string quartets op. 18. After a devastating fire in the Palais Rasumowsky it was no longer possible to hold concerts there and the quartet disbanded in 1816.



Original manuscript, op. 59 no. 3, finale



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Out of reverence to the dedicatee Beethoven worked Russian folk melodies into the first two quartets, as a theme of the last movement and as trio-theme of the third movement. These two folk tunes had been included in a collection of folk songs published in St. Petersburg in 1790, and Beethoven possibly knew them from Rasumowsky's library. The "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung" ("General Music Journal") criticised both quartets initially as being "very long and difficult, deeply thought out and splendidly worked, but not generally comprehensible", whereas the quartet in C major "must win over every educated music-lover with its originality, melody and strength of harmony". However the works gained quickly in popularity and propagation – Beethoven sold the opera 58 – 62 to Muzio Clementi for the English market. A transcript was used as master for the engraver's copy which Beethoven had given to Franz von Brunsvik. Beethoven could not find his own score and therefore wrote the letter displayed here to von Brunsvik's sister Josephine, asking her to arrange for her brother to dispatch the manuscript as quickly as possible.



"Russian Theme" from the final movement of op. 59 no. 1



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Showcase 5 (text by Michael Ladenburger)

The “Quartetto serioso” in F minor op. 95 – dedicated to his friend Nikolaus Zmeskall

Nikolaus Paul Zmeskall von Domanovecz and Lestine, born in 1759 in what was then Upper Hungary (the modern-day North Slovakia), was one of Beethoven’s earliest friends in Vienna. As a cellist and composer he was a dilettante, which then did not imply a lack of quality, but simply meant that he was an amateur who did not earn his living from music. When he was introduced to Beethoven, the qualified lawyer was working as a secretary at the Hungarian Chancellery; in the year in which the quartet was dedicated to him he was promoted from court secretary to privy councillor. In his leisure time he wrote no less than 14 string quartets. He organised private concerts, was friends with many musicians, 199 years ago he was a co-founder of the Society of the Friends of Music (Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde) and he helped Beethoven unselfishly in many everyday matters.

Beethoven sent Zmeskall the original edition, dedicated to him, of the work which had been written six years earlier but which had lain around for so long, on his 47th birthday, 16th December 1816, as a “dear memento of our longstanding friendship ... and as a token of my respect”. Shortly before he had thus described to him the essence of their friendship, the separating and connecting elements:

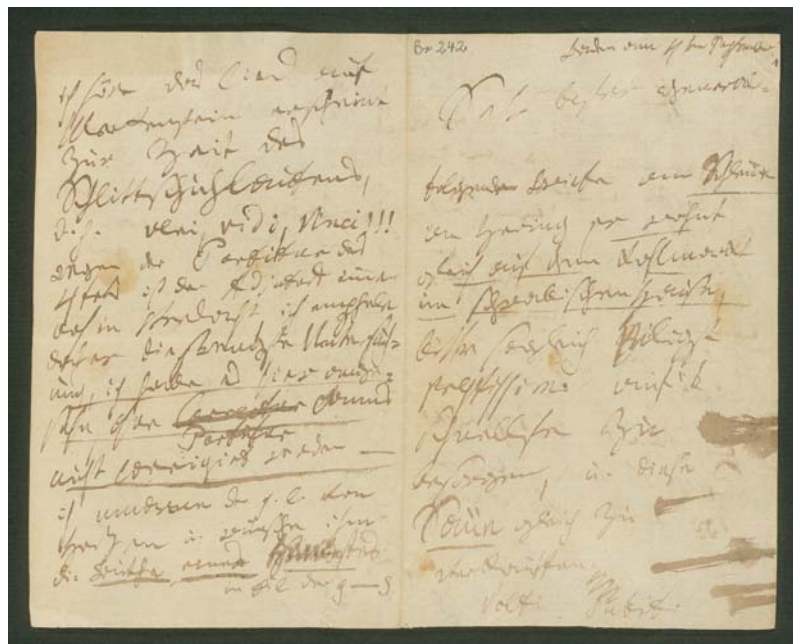
“Even as a child I gladly thought of all the good in other people and always kept it in mind. Then came the time when, particularly in an effete century, a young man could be forgiven for being somewhat intolerant, but now the nation is stronger once more, and as even without this I have since tried to embrace the attribute of not condemning a person on account of individual weaknesses, but to be just, to keep in mind the good in a person, and if this has in spoken actions now turned against me, nonetheless I have not seen myself as a friend of the entire human race, but rather have always considered and stated that there were some individuals who were my friends. So, having said this, I call you my friend, even if in some things we think and act differently, we have nevertheless in some matters come to an agreement. So – I shall stop this list – may you often put my friendship and devotion to the test!”

Beethoven’s particularly witty letter of 4th September 1816, written from his summer retreat to the publisher Steiner, says, “regarding the score of the quartet the adjutant is still under suspicion, I recommend therefore the strictest investigation, I have taken a look here, and without the score nothing can be put right”. And so he is asking for another diligent revision, observing that even he could not do that without the engraver’s copy.

The copy of the instrumental parts in the form of a score, a so-called “partition”, was long considered to be in Zmeskall’s handwriting, but this can hardly be true.



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Beethoven's letter to Steiner of 4th September 1816

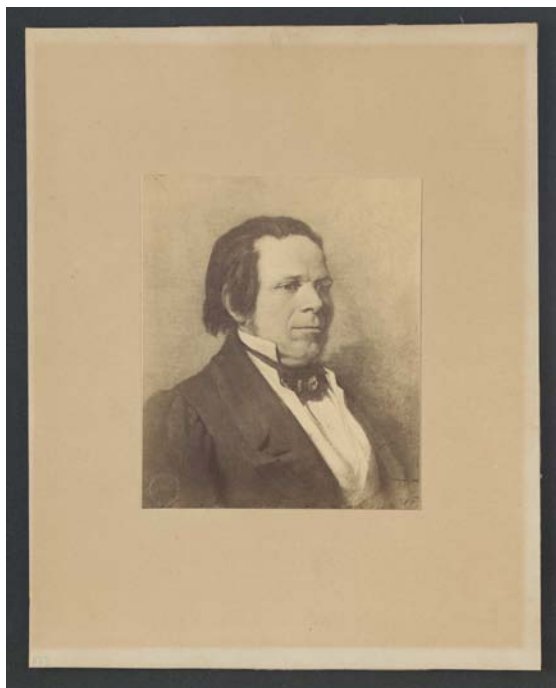
*Showcase 6 (text by Nicole Kämpken)***The “Galitzin Quartets” op. 127, op. 132 and op. 130 – compositions commissioned by a fervent admirer**

The enthusiastic music lover and amateur cellist Prince Nikolaus Galitzin of St. Petersburg asked Beethoven in November 1822 to write “one, two or three quartets”. This was in fact an actual assignment. Beethoven is specifically requested to name his desired price. Admittedly the payment turned out to be extremely slow and complicated – but Beethoven too took his time with the completion of the assignment. The composer decided on the fee of 50 ducats per string quartet – in total about half the year’s salary of a senior civil servant or the rent for a sizeable apartment in a summer resort. He promised to deliver the first piece in March 1823 and the prince gave the order to have the fee paid through his bank directly to Beethoven. The fervent admirer made a further concession to Beethoven in that he allowed him to sell the quartet to a publisher (normally the purchasing client would have sole rights to the piece for six months or a year). But since Beethoven did not actually deliver the first quartet until two years later, the fee which had already been paid was in the autumn of 1823 offset against the cost of Galitzin’s subscription copy of the *Missa Solemnis*. Here too Galitzin showed himself to be a real admirer as he arranged for the premiere of the *Missa* to take place in St. Petersburg on 7th April 1824. The second letter on display shows how he showered praise on the composer, saying he was overjoyed to be a contemporary of the “third music hero” (after Mozart and Haydn), who should rightly be proclaimed to be the “God of melody and harmony”. When the quartet in E-flat major had actually been delivered and notification made of the completion of the other two (A minor and B major), Galitzin planned in June 1825 to have payment made for them. In January of the following year he promised Beethoven an additional present of thanks for the dedication of the overture to “The Consecration of the House” op. 124, but Beethoven did not live to see actual payment. In August 1826 Galitzin’s bank informed him that the prince was in Koslow on account of the war –



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and then in November came an apologetic letter from the prince announcing his bankruptcy. Further attempts by Beethoven to obtain payment remained unsuccessful, not until long after his death did the prince's son settle the obligation with two payments to Beethoven's nephew Karl (in 1835 and 1852).



Ignaz Schuppanzigh

After the break-up of the quartet due to the fire at the Rasumowsky palace, Ignaz Schuppanzigh had travelled extensively through Germany, Poland and Russia and probably taken part in quartet performances at the court of Prince Galitzin, whereby he may have inspired him to give Beethoven the composition assignment. On his return to Vienna he founded in 1823 a new ensemble with Karl Holz (violin), Franz Weiss (viola) and Joseph Linke (cello) which gave the first public performance of almost all of Beethoven's later string quartets.

Showcase 7 (text by Prof. Emil Platen)

Quartet in A minor op. 132, the second of the "Galitzin Quartets"

Even before the first of the "Galitzin Quartets" in E-flat major was properly finished, Beethoven had towards the end of 1824 begun with the composition of a second piece. His creative energy was at its peak, ideas flowed – but work was unfortunately interrupted by a serious illness. Beethoven sublimated his feelings of gratitude at overcoming the illness in the Molto Adagio of the quartet, the "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart" ("A convalescent's holy song of thanksgiving to the divinity, in the Lydian mode").



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Through letters and in particular through the conversation notebooks with which Beethoven communicated with those around him, we are well informed about the preparations for the first public performance. After the work was completed in July 1825 the parts for the individual instruments were copied out from his handwritten original score. The tried and trusted professional copyist Wenzel Rampl had, in view of Beethoven's barely legible handwriting, refused such a difficult and therefore unremunerative commission, since he was paid per copied sheet and not per hour. Joseph Linke, the cellist of Beethoven's "private quartet", agreed to do it, but he had to capitulate after copying the 4th movement. The reason for this was written down by Karl Holz, the quartet's second violin, in Beethoven's conversation notebook of August 1825:

"Linke has a headache from the unfamiliar exertion, and so I have copied the last part [....]". A letter written to Karl Holz concerning the copying shows just how seriously Beethoven treated his perusal of the copied parts. It shows how important he considered the meticulous writing out of instructions on volume and articulation (see transcription of letter in the showcase).



"Heiliger Danksagung" – written out by Joseph Linke

last part – written out by Karl Holz

Beethoven's instructions have been carried out exactly during the correction of the copy. Added fingering and other notes made by musicians prove that the parts were used for performing, in fact for the very first, absolutely private performances by the quartet in front of an invited circle of music lovers and the publisher Maurice Schlesinger, who later took this copy with him to Paris to serve as the master copy for the engraving plate of the first edition – on show in the second room of the special exhibition on the ground floor.



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The copyist Wenzel Rampl did in the end get a commission: it was “easy for him”, as Karl Holz remarked, to copy a score in smaller format for the commissioning client Galitzin from the instrumental parts, which had been cleanly and legibly written out by the musicians.

Showcase 8 (text by Prof. Emil Platen)

The divided work of art

The third of the “Galitzin Quartets”, in B major and later given the opus number 130, was first performed in public by the Schuppanzigh Quartet on 21st March 1826 in the concert hall of the Vienna Music Society. Its impact on an expectant audience was divided, as reported by the critic of the “Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung” (General Music Journal):

“The first, third and fifth movements are serious, sombre, mystical, sometimes bizarre, harsh and capricious; the second and fourth are full of wantonness, joy and roguishness [...] Thunderous applause demanded a repeat of these two movements. But your correspondent does not dare to construe the meaning of the fugued finale, for him it was as incomprehensible as Chinese. When instruments at the North and South Poles have to battle against outrageous difficulties, when each one of them figures differently and when they frustrate each other per transitum irregularum amidst a myriad of dissonances, when the players, suspicious of themselves, do not play quite cleanly, then the confusion of Babel is indeed perfect”.

The music community of Vienna was no better able than the critic to understand “the meaning of the fugued finale”, which in many respects was at a tangent to familiar audience expectation. A comment written by Beethoven’s brother Johann just two weeks after the performance describes the situation less professionally but nevertheless accurately:

“The whole city is full of your last quartet, all are entranced by it, the benevolent say that one would have to hear the last piece more often in order to understand it, the others hope that this would not happen, for it is too difficult to understand”.

The quartet in B major had become a problem, and the fugue the bone of contention. The problem was more serious than any difficulties of comprehension which had often occurred during first performances of earlier quartets, where familiarity had in time gradually set in. With regard to the form of the work everything remained for the time being unchanged, an engraving of the quartet was made and Prince Galatzin received a copy with the fugue as final movement. The publisher offered, “for the purpose of better understanding”, to publish a transcript of the fugue for four hand piano, which if possible should be supplied by the composer himself. Beethoven obviously refused and Holz recommended the pianist Anton Halm, who in April 1826 presented to Beethoven the result of his efforts, together with a reverential accompanying letter. Beethoven was apparently not satisfied, but did not express his opinion clearly and left the matter up in the air for months.

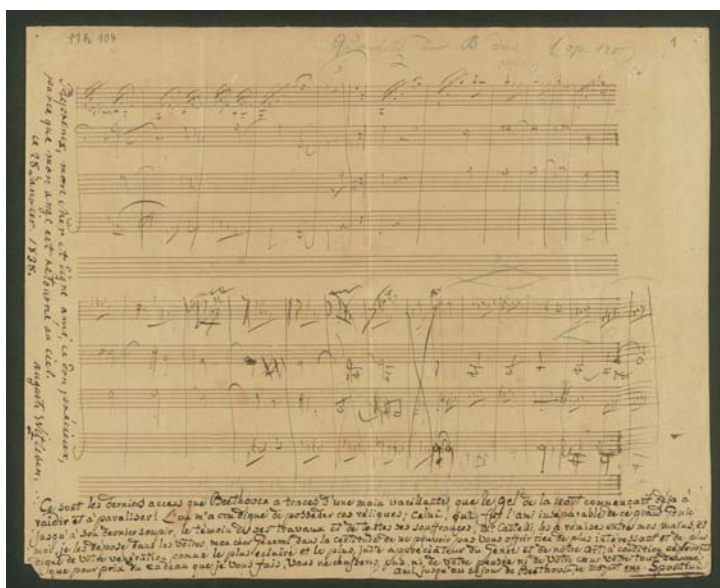
When he had finished working on the quartet in C-sharp minor op. 131, he seems to have taken up the matter again. Towards the end of August he apparently decided to produce the piano version himself. Early in September he asks his confidant Holz to deliver the score for four hand piano to the publisher Artaria and adds in a note: “It has now become a work in its own right”. It is clear from another letter to Holz that neither the publisher nor the intermediary had taken the



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initiative on this: „[...] I ask you to tell Mr. Mathias A. that I shall certainly not force him to accept my piano score [...]”.

In September there were first indications that the fugue was to become a separate piece, which meant that the quartet required a new finale. Holz wrote in a conversation notebook: „Artaria is delighted that you accept his suggestion, it is greatly to his advantage when both works are requested separately“. But the fifth quartet, which Beethoven had promised the publisher Schlesinger and which he had been working on since August, had to be finished first. The new finale was then written as Beethoven's very last composition during a stay at his brother's country estate in Gneixendorf and was remunerated with 15 ducats by Artaria upon delivery on the 25th November.



Sketch for the score of the new finale

The new version seemed to everyone to be a pragmatic solution to the problem of the quartet in B major, and indeed it could even be claimed to have ensured its successful history. Without the new finale op. 130 would hardly have been performed 214 times throughout the world in the first fifty years, which secured it third place in the popularity statistics, behind op. 132 (274) and op. 131 (260). The division did however mean that the Grand Fugue, with only 14 performances, sank into a state of oblivion, out of which it was not retrieved until the 20th century, and then only amidst some fierce controversy among experts.

In the meantime more than 175 years have served to change points of view. The division is no longer considered to be the composer's irreversible decision. Unlike other irrevocable changes in Beethoven's creative work, the fugue was not categorically removed from the quartet's construct. Indeed it can be incorporated into the original context of the first version, as an entity which is separate but related by lineage. But such a restitution does not mean that the new version, the allegro which was composed subsequently, loses its right of existence. In his op. 130 Beethoven has developed two alternative concepts which differ from each other because of their radically contrasting final movements. This indeed is consistent with their form as a whole, shaped by internal contrasts. With this knowledge of the circumstances and of Beethoven's attitude as composer, we are left with no doubt that both finali must be considered as being authentic and in some respects of equal value.



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Showcase 1 (text by Michael Ladenburger)

The quartet in C-sharp minor op. 131 – dedicated to an army officer

What does a string quartet, which does not even contain a march, have to do with the army? Musically ... nothing at all. But Beethoven dedicated it to a soldier: Lieutenant Field Marshall Baron Joseph von Stutterheim. Beethoven was suddenly under obligation to him, for he had accepted Beethoven's nephew Karl into his regiment after the latter had attempted to kill himself in August 1826 and subsequently had to be "taken care of". The nephew was taken into the "Archduke Rudolph" Regiment, of which Stutterheim was second-in-command. Unlike the earlier quartets op. 127, 132 and 130, together with the Grand Fugue op. 133 (which had originally been composed as the final movement of op. 130), the quartet in C-sharp minor was not commissioned by Prince Galitzin. But Beethoven was full of zest. "My dearest friend, I have had another idea" he explained to Karl Holz, second violin of the Schuppanzigh Quartet. He also confided to him that he thought this was his best quartet.

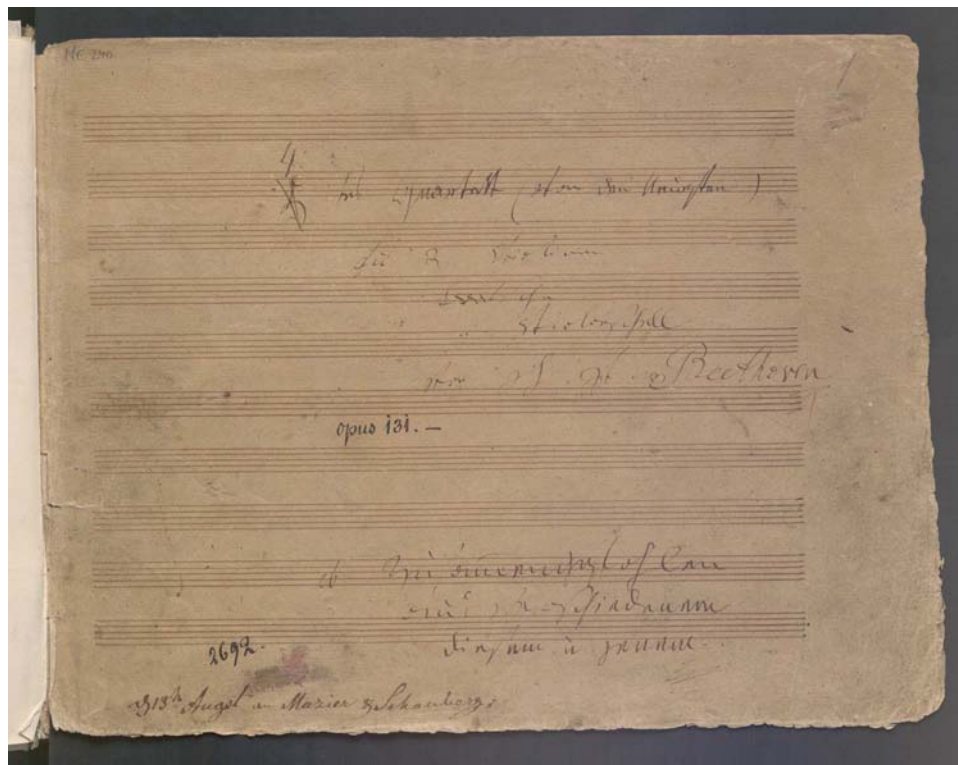
The quartet is unusual in more than one respect. It does not consist of seven movements, as is often claimed, but rather of seven *pieces*, an expression which was not chosen by accident. The third piece is an 11 bar recitativo, the sixth piece is a 28 bar slow introduction. Both have more the character of an intermezzo, when compared with the other pieces which are up to 498 bars long. Another particular feature is that the composer used the instruction "attacca" to specify that it should be played without a break. The musicians responded by asking when they were going to have the chance to re-tune their instruments. Unique is the playing instruction "sul ponticello" in the 5th piece. Amazingly the deaf composer demanded here a particular type of playing, i.e. bowing very near to the bridge. This produces a thin, metallic sound which has something uncanny about it.

Unlike the previous quartet, which ends with an allegro fugue, this one begins with an adagio fugue. There is an early version of this which was kept from 1897 to 1901 in Bonn and then sold without view to profit by Erich Prieger to the Royal Library in Berlin, together with the complete Beethoven collection which had been acquired from the Vienna publisher Artaria.

A recent addition to the Beethoven House collection is the so-called engraver's copy, the manuscript made by a copyist, which Beethoven read through so carefully and sent in August 1826 to the music publisher Schott in Mainz, who published the first edition shortly after the composer's death. After 177 years it was finally passed on to the Beethoven house, where it has now found its permanent home. This was made possible by support from the Culture Foundation of the Federal States, the Art Foundation of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Gielen-Leyendecker-Foundation, the Hans-Joachim-Feiter-Foundation, together with the support of Anne-Sophie Mutter and Hermann Neusser jun.



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Cover page of the copy of op. 131 with corrections in Beethoven's handwriting

The page from a sketchbook came back to Bonn 55 years ago. In 1845 the pianist and composer Ignaz Moscheles removed it from a sketchbook and gave it to the sculptor Ernst Julius Hähnel. He sculptured the Beethoven Memorial in the square in front of Bonn Cathedral – the very first memorial to Beethoven. Moscheles wrote a dedication on the front: “Beethoven’s handwriting. To Professor Hähnel as a memento of the unveiling of the monument in Bonn, which aroused in me the highest admiration of its perfect perception of the immortal maestro. August 1845. I. Moscheles”. Franz Liszt, whose 200th birthday is being celebrated this year, not only played an important role in the funding of the monument, he was also at the centre of the unveiling ceremony.

Showcase 2 (text by Prof. Emil Platen)

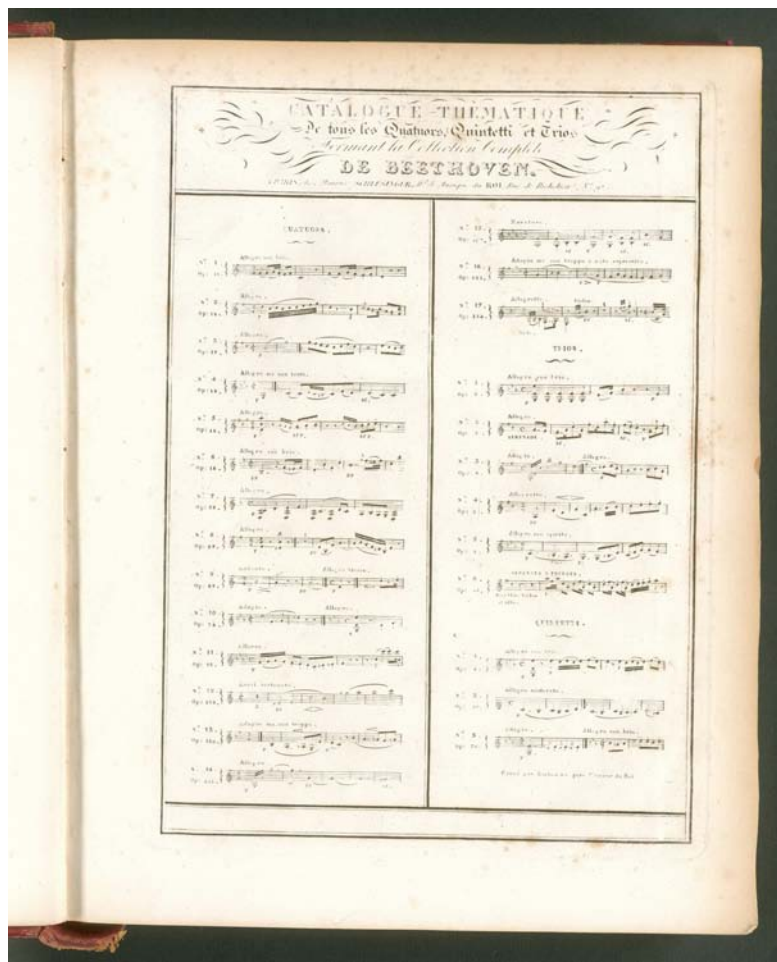
Schlesinger’s « Collection complète »

The young Moritz Schlesinger, son of the renowned Berlin music publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger, who at his father’s behest had visited Beethoven in 1819 in Vienna, founded his own music publishing house in Paris under the name of Maurice Schlesinger and soon developed into a passionate proponent of Beethoven’s music in France. From 1822 he had made great efforts to become an “original” Beethoven publisher and to acquire the publishing rights for new string quartets, but more than once he had been disappointed by unfulfilled promises from the composer.



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During another visit in Baden near Vienna in 1822 he was able to discuss and develop with the composer in person his dream of producing a edition of Beethoven's complete works, although the latter was sceptical. The project was to be initiated with a "Collection complète des Trios, Quatuors et Quintetti pour instruments à cordes", a complete edition of all compositions of string chamber music, with a total of 26 works. By including hitherto unpublished compositions of Beethoven's, Schlesinger wanted to procure for his edition a certain exclusivity. With his disarming personality and some clever negotiation he was able to win Beethoven's goodwill, which finally led to him purchasing the publishing rights for the two quartets in A minor and F major. They were first published in the "Collection complète" – the only quartets by Beethoven which were not first published in a German-speaking country. (Parallel editions were however published shortly afterwards by the Berlin company of Schlesinger's father.)



Thematic table of contents from the "collection complète" by Moritz Schlesinger

The edition is richly decorated with ornate engraved title pages and a portrait of Beethoven as frontispiece. A table of contents lists as catalogue thématique the beginnings of all works with examples of the music. And vis-à-vis all his competitors only Schlesinger was able to point to a facsimile with examples of Beethoven's handwriting and music notation.



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Showcases 3 and 4 (texts by Prof. Emil Platen)

The composer as copyist

The string quartet in F major op. 135 is Beethoven's last work with more than one movement (only the allegro movement which replaced the Grand Fugue as finale of the string quartet in B major was written later). It rounds off not only the group of the "five last quartets" but also the imposing complete body of work, without ever being considered itself to be a grand finale or artistic "legacy". The expansion of dimension which is physically recognisable in the previous quartets is not continued here, indeed together with the quartet in F minor op. 95 it is one of Beethoven's shortest chamber music compositions and at one point he had even considered only developing it into three movements. However it did end up having four movements in the classical pattern, with an assai lento in D-flat major, the theme of which first appeared in the sketches for the quartet in C-sharp minor and which was originally intended to make up an episode in the finale of that quartet.



Beethoven's handwritten score of the first movement of op. 135

With the copy of the instrumental parts for this quartet written in Beethoven's own hand, the Beethoven House has in its possession an item of genuine rarity. Normally for the first performances the instrumental parts would be written out by professional copyists "from the score". In this case it was the express wish of the publisher that the composer deliver the work in the form of instrumental parts, in order to save the engravers having to write them out themselves, a process which always proved to be a source of error.



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In Gneixendorf (Lower Austria), where Beethoven stayed on his brother's country estate in late autumn 1826, there were no suitable scribes, so the composer was forced to act as his own copyist. It was a task which Beethoven took on with the greatest of reluctance, as can be seen from the result. If it had been the work of a professional copyist it would, as certain earlier occurrences show, have evoked his utmost displeasure. He tried to make the job as easy as possible for himself by using repeat marks or comments such as "come sopra" to indicate the recurrence of whole groups of bars. Nor was he quite able to avoid making mistakes: in the first movement the part of the second violin and in the second movement the part of the first violin each have a bar missing. Instead, due to a copying mistake, in the last movement the violino primo has two bars more than the other parts. In other words, a performance using these instrumental parts would in several places have led at least to confusion, which goes to show that a brilliant composer does not necessarily also have to be a perfect copyist.



Beethoven's handwritten instrumental part for first violin of op. 135

The decision reached with difficulty

There are many indications that in his late work Beethoven strove to make his music almost "speak". The instruments express themselves in modes taken from vocal music, such as cavatina, recitativo, arioso, as "wailing vocals" and finally they seem directly to speak: "Muß es sein? Es muß sein!" (Must it be? It must be!) This motto, with which Beethoven prefixed the final movement of the quartet in F major op. 135 as a headline in written motifs and in strongly emotional contrast to grave and allegro, has been the cause of much speculation.



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“Motto” of the final movement of op.135 in Beethoven’s handwriting

The theory that it is an allusion to questions of fate, sometimes seen as referring to the fact that it was Beethoven’s last composition with more than one movement, is refuted by the character of the movement, which, despite the insistently questioning grave episodes, seems altogether light and cheery, in fact even playful. There have been several attempts to explain the quotation against a biographical background, the most probable being the version told by Karl Holz, second violin of the Schuppanzigh Quartet and at the time of the work’s composition, a close confidant of Beethoven’s:

“Beethoven had just finished his quartet in B [op. 130] (dedicated to Prince Gallizin), and gave his friend Schuppanzigh the manuscript for the first performance, with which the latter hoped for a good profit. Beethoven was all the more annoyed when he heard after the performance that a well-known and wealthy Viennese music lover D[embscher] was not present, claiming that he could later have the quartet played in front of his own circle of friends and by better musicians. It would not be difficult for him to obtain B.’s manuscript. And indeed, shortly afterwards this gentleman approached Beethoven through the intercession of a friend and asked him for the instrumental parts for the new quartet. Beethoven replied in writing that he would send the parts if Schuppanzigh received a reimbursement of 50 guilders for the first performance. Unpleasantly surprised, D[embscher] said to the bearer of the note: “If it must be?”. When Beethoven was informed of this reply, he laughed heartily and immediately wrote down the canon: “It must be! It must be!” [WoO 196]. In late autumn 1826 this canon became the finale of his last quartet in F major, which he prefixed: “The decision reached with difficulty”.

The extract from the first edition of the publishing house Schlesinger in Paris shows the printed version with a French translation by the publisher, which captures neither the meaning nor the intonation: “Un effort d’inspiration. / Le faut - il? il le faut! il le faut! ”.