

# PROGRAM NOTES

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

### String Quartet in F MINOR, OP. 95 "Serioso"



By 1809, ten years after he arrived in Vienna, Beethoven found himself in a state of turmoil, both personal and political. In the early months, his fortunes seemed to be on the rise when three Viennese aristocrats (Archduke Rudolph, Prince von Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky) pooled their resources to provide him with an annuity, assuring him of an annual income of 4,000 florins. His income secure, Beethoven's thoughts now turned to marriage. He proposed to his teenage pupil Terese Malfetti, but her family rejected his suit. Devastated, Beethoven wrote to a friend in Freiburg for help in finding a wife. Meanwhile, Napoleon's army was marching on Vienna to occupy the capital for the second time in four years. As they advanced, the imperial family, including Beethoven's close friend and patron Archduke Rudolph, fled to the town of Ofen. In July, Beethoven wrote to his publisher, "What destructive, barren life around me here, nothing but drums, cannon and human misery of every kind".

Clearly, it was difficult for Beethoven to compose under such conditions, but he doggedly set to work and filled his notebook with no fewer than 30 pages of notes and sketches. The French occupied Vienna in May, and Beethoven remained throughout the summer to devote himself to composition. It was a productive time, for by September he completed several piano works, the *String Quartet Op. 74* ("The Harp") and the *String Quartet in f minor, Op. 95* ("Serioso").

Many of the titles of Beethoven's works ("Moonlight", "Harp" et al.) were coined by critics and scholars long after the composer's death. "Serioso", however, was devised by Beethoven, who used it in the tempo mark for the third movement of Op. 95: *Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso*. It describes the prevailing melancholy of the first three movements, and it is also consistent with Beethoven's gloomy state of mind at this time in his life.

Beethoven was hesitant to publish this quartet (hence the late opus number), perhaps because he feared it would be misunderstood. It was certainly stylistically ahead of its time, and modern commentators consider it a harbinger of the late quartets. One characteristic often cited is its compression. In the last two quartets of his middle period (Opp. 74 and 95), Beethoven packs in a wealth of musical ideas, a wider range of dynamics and occasional dramatic silences. This is particularly the case in the densely textured first movement of Op.95, in which on two occasions the music is suddenly brought to a jarring halt. Although it is not marked as such, the second movement serves as a slow movement, offering a brief respite from the intensity of the first. The third movement, which continues without pause, is a *Scherzo* marked *Allegro assai*

*vivace, ma non troppo* (a very lively Allegro, but serious). Its middle section may merit the term *serioso*, but it opens and closes in the same stormy mood as that of the first movement. A dramatic introductory passage leads to the *finale*, which establishes an atmosphere of ominous foreboding, as if heralding the approach of a summer storm. The *finale* is a study in thematic contrasts, alternating tempestuous outbreaks with periods of restless calm. In this movement, Beethoven's quartet writing approaches an orchestral quality that will eventually flourish in the late quartets.

The *Quartet in f minor, Op. 95* was composed in 1810 and published in Vienna in 1816. It was dedicated to Nicklaus Zuneskall, an official of the Hungarian Chancellery and a long-time friend of Beethoven's. He was the first non-aristocrat to receive a dedication from Beethoven.

-James Cannon

## PAUL WIANCKO (1983-)

### Strange Beloved Land



Foreign lands and the exotic thread these works together. Commissioned by the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, Paul Wiancko's *Strange Beloved Land* was written for and premiered by the Parker Quartet. An homage to the composer's father who had recently passed, the work's title comes from a documentary Wiancko's father made about his visits to Romania.



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## JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

### Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major, Op. 67



In the summer of 1875 Brahms was preoccupied with preparations for the first performance of his first symphony, but he nevertheless found time to write a string quartet for one of his friends, a cellist by the name of Theodore Engelmann. Brahms's correspondence with Engelmann reveals his state of mind at the time as well as his lively sense of humor. Brahms wrote:

"This quartet is a useless trifle to avoid facing the serious countenance of a symphony," and "(It) rather resembles your wife—very dainty, but brilliant! .... There's no cello solo in it, but such a tender viola solo that you may want to change your instrument for its sake!"

In the cheerful first movement, the composer plays with the possible subdivisions of 12/8 time, at times throwing the listener off as accented offbeats sound like repositioned downbeats. The rhapsodic second movement, with its expansive aria for the first violin, is regarded by Brahms connoisseurs as one of his most beautiful slow movements. The calm flow of the accompaniment is soon disturbed by abruptly accented chords played by all four instruments. As the movement unfolds, Brahms returns to the smooth legato texture, moving deftly among harmonic surprises. The third movement, marked *agitato*, contains the viola solo to which Brahms refers in his letter. The tempo indication, which means agitated, could well refer to the harmony as well, which wanders, changes key constantly, and shades towards minor even in major-key passages. A short Trio section provides a contrast: the three muted instruments play a fragmented, graceful passage, after which the viola enters and sings a mournful melody. After the return of the original theme, a mysterious coda brings an uneasy conclusion to the movement. The final movement is a set of variations on a tune that has the feel of a German folk song. Some variations frolic, some are poignant, and one provides a return to the foreground for the violist.

-Stephen Ackert

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