

# 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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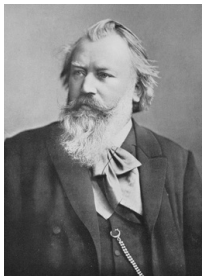
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## JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

### 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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# TONIGHT'S ARTISTS

## Parker Quartet



Daniel Chong, Kee-Hyun Kim,  
Jessica Bodner, Ken Hamao

Internationally recognized for their “fearless, yet probingly beautiful” performances (The Strad), the Grammy Award-winning Parker Quartet has established itself as one of the preeminent ensembles of its generation since its founding in 2002. Renowned for their fresh interpretations of canonical works and their passionate advocacy for contemporary music, the Quartet continues to chart a dynamic artistic path rooted in both tradition and innovation.

Praised by Gramophone for playing in which “virtuosity and emotion are one,” the Parker Quartet has performed for over two decades on many of the world’s leading stages. Recent seasons have included appearances at Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Konzerthaus Berlin, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the University of Chicago, the 92nd Street Y, and Da Camera of Houston, among others. The Quartet has also been featured at major festivals such as Tanglewood, Big Ears, Norfolk, Lake Champlain, Bridgehampton, Skaneateles, San Miguel de Allende, and the Banff Centre.

In the 2025–26 season, the Quartet launches The Schubert Project—a deep exploration of Franz Schubert’s final chamber works, including his late string quartets and the Cello Quintet. This project aims to contextualize Schubert’s late style through multidisciplinary lenses and performance collaborations. Upcoming quintet engagements include performances with Jay Campbell at the Crypt Sessions in New York City, with Paul Watkins at Harvard and Yale Universities, and with Raman Ramakrishnan at DACAMERA of Houston. Other season highlights include a multi-island concert tour of Hawaii and renewed collaborations with mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron.

Bold programming and cross-disciplinary initiatives are hallmarks of the Quartet’s artistic identity. In 2024, they curated a program centered on nature and heritage, combining music with poetry by Arthur Sze and Victoria Chang, and featuring a new commission

by Anthony Cheung for quartet and mezzo-soprano. During their 20th anniversary season (2022–23), the Parker Quartet launched The Beethoven Project, a multifaceted initiative including: performances of the complete Beethoven string quartets; commissioned encores from six contemporary composers; the development of a digital video library highlighting each work; and community-centered performances in non-traditional venues across Boston, including homeless shelters and youth programs.

Deeply committed to the music of our time, the Quartet has commissioned and premiered works by Augusta Read Thomas, Felipe Lara, Jaehyuck Choi, Zosha Di Castri, Paul Wiancko, Anthony Cheung, Wang Lu, Michi Wiancko, Sky Macklay, and Jeremy Gill. As part of Miller Theatre’s Mission: Commission podcast, they recorded new works by Kate Soper, Oscar Bettison, and Vijay Iyer—celebrating the creative process and contemporary collaboration.

Their artistic partnerships span a wide range of disciplines and genres. Past collaborators include pianists Menahem Pressler, Anne-Marie McDermott, Orion Weiss, Shai Wosner, Billy Childs, and Vijay Iyer; clarinetists and composers Jörg Widmann, Anthony McGill, and Charles Neidich; flutist Claire Chase; and violist Kim Kashkashian. The Quartet is also a proud supporter of Kashkashian’s Music for Food initiative, performing in concerts nationwide to benefit food banks and social service organizations.

Recording remains a central component of the Quartet’s artistic output. Their 2021 ECM release, featuring Dvořák’s Viola Quintet with Kim Kashkashian alongside works by György Kurtág, was described by The Strad as “nothing short of astonishing,” and by Gramophone as “defined by virtuosity so agile that it’s indistinguishable from the process of emotional expression.” Their 2019 recording of three Beethoven quartets (Monte Carlo’s Festival Printemps des Arts) earned accolades from Diapason for its “fearlessness, exceptional control, and attention to detail.” Additional recordings include Mendelssohn on Nimbus Records, Bartók on Zig-Zag Territoires, and the complete Ligeti Quartets on Naxos—a performance that garnered the 2011 Grammy Award for Best Chamber Music Performance.

The Parker Quartet currently serves as Professors of the Practice and Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at the Department of Music at Harvard University. They also hold visiting residencies at the University of South Carolina and the Walnut Hill School for the Arts.

Founded and based in Boston, the Quartet’s numerous honors include winning the Concert Artists Guild Competition, the Grand Prix and Mozart Prize at the Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition, and Chamber Music America’s prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award.