

**Beethoven's String Quartets – a Lifelong Passion**  
**A lecture at the 11th Canberra International**  
**Chamber Music Festival**

By Don Aitkin

I would like to start by taking you to the little village of Milton Abbas, in Dorset. The squire decided that the village should be reconstructed as a 'model village' and he paid for that to happen. We know when he did so because he built an 'Old Men's Home' directly opposite the church, a much older structure that dates from the 14th century. Over the door of the Old Men's Home is the date of construction – 1770. It's a year that Australians all recognise as the European discovery of the eastern coast of Australia, carried out by Captain James Cook. For the purposes of this talk you might also note that is the year of birth of Ludwig van Beethoven, in Bonn. In 1788 Arthur Phillip brings the First Fleet into Sydney Cove, a few months after the young Beethoven has visited Vienna for the first time, hurrying home again when he hears of the likely death of his mother. The French Revolution conventionally starts in the next year, 1789, with the fall of the Bastille. Beethoven returned to Vienna, which was to be his home for the rest of his life, in November 1792, and three weeks later Arthur Phillip, quite ill, sailed back to England taking with him two Aboriginal people, one of them, Bennelong, immortalised as the name of the point on which now sits the Sydney opera House. In 1828 the first official census of new South Wales revealed that there were nearly 37,000 people in the new colony, only forty years after its establishment. That is also the year in which Beethoven died, aged 58. Franz Schubert, who revered but hardly knew the older composer, was one of those accompanying the coffin at Beethoven's funeral. He himself was to die a year later.

I mention all these separate events because it seems to me that we get a better sense of composers and their works by knowing what else is happening in the world at the time. I probably also do it because I was trained as a historian, and so making these connections seems perfectly natural to me. I should begin by explaining that, as is the case in each of the week's talks, this one is given by someone who is not a professional musician or performer. I play the piano, but not well. But music has been important to me since I was a little child and heard my mother singing. She sang during the day, and played the piano as well. Singing and music have always seemed to me an important part of life, and all of it interests me. I should also say that the advertised title of this talk is not truly

correct, and the little story I am about to tell explains why. Fifty years ago, as one of four or five second year honours students in History at the University of New England, I was invited, along with the others, to 'an evening' hosted by our Lecturer, Mr Stargardt. This was a rare event, in fact the first of only a very few in the time I was an undergraduate. Mr Stargardt was not at the University for long, and eventually became the editor of a major biographical service in Britain. When he left he took with him, as wife, one of the girls in the year ahead of mine. But that's another story.

We sat around and drank sherry and Mr Stargardt asked whether we would like to hear some music. He played us two Beethoven string quartets. It is probably fair to say that none of us had ever heard such music before. It was only the second year in which one could buy long playing records that spun at 33.3 revolutions per minute and required a sapphire needle. At the end we had coffee, and Mr Stargardt, a youngish, probably Austrian Jewish refugee, asked us all what we thought. I was seventeen at the time, and had just discovered the Grieg Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. I couldn't make head or tail of this spare, stringy stuff, and with seventeen-year-old candour, I said so. I realised at once that I had been most impolite, and waited for the wrath of God to fall on me. But he was disarmingly pleasant. 'I think it is that you are perhaps too young,' he said. 'But I promise you that in time you will come to know and love these works.'

In that or the following year, 1956, I was the President of the University's music society, Philomuse, and we had the good fortune to secure a visit to the University of the Amadeus Quartet, then touring for Musica Viva. One of the quartet, probably Peter Schidlof, the second violin, spoke to us, and explained that if we liked symphonies we should like string quartets, because the argument within and the integration of the quartet and the symphony orchestra were very similar. They played us the Rosamunde Quartet by Schubert by way of illustration. I have to confess that in my enthusiasm I moved the vote of thanks by saying, of this utterly free concert, 'that we had really had our money's worth!'

I have never forgotten either episode. Ten years later I was in Oxford, a postdoc with my own wife and little children, living in a flat in the Haldane house at the very end of Linton Road, a famous North Oxford house and street. The house is gone and the grounds now occupied by Wolfsohn College, but in 1965 it was full of students of various ages and persuasions. Some of them had music going all the time, and we exchanged records and tapes (I had a brand new reel-to-reel tape recorder bought at Aden on the way over). Here I discovered, as though for the first time, the Beethoven String Quartets, and some of Haydn's and Mozart's as well. I even heard some live, in the Music Room, in Holywell, England's oldest performance space simply for music. I recorded everything I could, took the tapes with me to America and finally brought them back to Australia. I played them

scores of times. The quartets became my friends for life. If, as in ‘Desert Island Disks’, I had to nominate a small set of music to accompany me to a lonely destination, it would probably be the Beethoven String Quartets that I chose. The rest of this talk tells you why.

Beethoven’s quartets represent, I think, one of the great mountain peaks in the Himalayas of Western culture, like Shakespeare’s plays, the novels of Jane Austen, the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo’s sculptures, and so on. They have this status because, two hundred years later, they still represent the highest achievement in this field. You can hear them again and again, and they never stale; there is always something new to experience in them. Music is a difficult medium to deal with in words, because it is truly inexpressible other than in music. We don’t know what Beethoven’s ‘message’ was in any of them, but when we listen we are transported from what we are doing to another plane or another world. It is the world of human creativity, which you could think of as ourselves at our highest or best, in touch with something greater than ourselves and our worldly existence. So it is, at any rate, for me.

Well, there they are, 16 or 17 pieces of music written for two violins, a viola and a cello. The number all depends on whether you count ‘der grosse Fuge’, originally the final movement of the op.130 quartet, as a quartet itself. Beethoven eventually wrote a different finale for op.130, and the great fugue now bears its own opus number, as op.133. Some quartets were written in each of the three major periods of his creative life, and so they are often divided into ‘the early’, ‘the middle’, and ‘the late’ quartets. The early ones often sound as if Haydn or, more rarely, Mozart, had written them. **(ILLUSTRATE)** The middle ones were composed when he realised that deafness was approaching him, and they mark a real shift in his style (I shall say something more about the middle ones later, because we will be hearing one of them, the 3rd Razumovsky quartet, tonight). The late ones were composed in his last years, when he was quite deaf. He never heard them played, as indeed he never heard anything played after about 1812 (his deafness was incremental).

How can composer compose if he can’t hear anything? In Beethoven’s case the answer is that by the time his deafness overtook him he was 40 and an experienced composer and performer who could hear the music in his head. I don’t find this an astonishing capacity, though it is uncommon. There is a nice little story about Sir Donald Tovey, the great Beethoven scholar who, as a young boy came to his father reading a Haydn score, and crying. His father asked him why. The boy pointed to the score, shook his head, and said, ‘It’s so beautiful’. Beethoven composed and heard music in his head, but before his deafness arrived he had also worked with a group of players who were among the best in Vienna at the time and therefore, arguably, the best there were. We need to know something about them — and about the quartet itself.

The string quartet as a piece of music grew out of the divertimento or serenade, a set of pieces, some slow, some fast, that served originally as a kind of dinner music or entertainment. Joseph Haydn gave the quartet its four-movement structure and its four-part texture, with each of the players, not just the first violin, having something interesting to do and not simply doubling one another, as would have been the case much of the time in the divertimento. The four parts allowed practically all kinds of harmonic invention, while the listener can hear the parts and the whole at the same time, something that is often difficult with symphonic compositions. String quartets grew in interest in the latter half of the 18th century, and were intended for amateur performance. To be musically educated and also 'a proficient' (to use Lady Catherine de Bourgh's term from *Pride and Prejudice*) was the mark of a civilised gentleman at this time (and of civilised ladies, too).

When Beethoven came to Vienna he came as a great pianist, and his trios. He was not a violinist, but he at least knew how to play the instrument, and he is known to have played the viola in quartets with excellent musicians, so he can't have been a mediocre performer. Incidentally, Mozart and Schubert, also pianist-composers, were also useful with the viola. Indeed, we know that one evening in Vienna in 1784 the English composer Stephen Storace gave a concert party to his friends in which Haydn (V1), Mozart (Viola), Dittersdorf (V2) and Vanhall (C) – all composers – formed the quartet. Paisiello, another composer, was among the guests. Michael Kelly, an Irish tenor and theatre manager who was yet another guest, wrote rather dryly that 'The players were tolerable; not one of them excelled on the instrument he played, but there was a little science among them'.

Beethoven arrived in Vienna in 1792 as a 22 year- old, and in that same year arrived, as Russian Ambassador to the Imperial Court in Vienna, a certain Count Andrey Kyrillovich Razumovsky, a practising amateur violinist himself; in 1796 he became one of Beethoven's aristocratic patrons. He was very rich, rich enough to hire a group of string players so that he could play string quartets and also listen to them with his guests. Razumovsky got Haydn to teach him how Haydn's quartets ought to be played, and Haydn thought the Count understood nuance and sensitivity very well. The principal violinist of the group was Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a portly man whom Beethoven liked and respected, even though he called him 'Fatso' and 'Falstaff' on account of his girth. Schuppanzigh was to be an important figure in Viennese musical life for much of the next thirty years, and we owe him a lot.

He was one of the first conductors, and in fact was the conductor for the first performance of Beethoven's 7th Symphony. Before Razumovsky took him on, Schuppanzigh and his colleagues were the house quartet of Prince Lichnowsky,

an Austrian aristocrat, despite his surname, and another of Beethoven's patrons. The Schuppanzigh quartet gave weekly concerts at the Lichnowsky palace. The Prince had been both a pupil and a patron of Mozart, and none other than Haydn introduced Beethoven to him. If all this sounds very close and intimate, you need to remember that Vienna in 1800 had a population of about 230,000 – about two-thirds the size of Canberra today and it was very much smaller in area – no bigger, I should think than what we now call 'Old Canberra'. Its musical life was rich and varied: that premiere of Beethoven's 7th was played by an orchestra whose members included the composers Hummel, Meyerbeer, Salieri and Spohr and the great contemporary double-bass virtuoso, Domenico Dragonetti. Dragonetti was one of the best-paid musicians in Europe; he is said to have played one of Beethoven's cello sonatas with the composer at the piano, after which Beethoven embraced both Dragonetti and his cello!

Back to Schuppanzigh, who in 1804 formed a new quartet to give subscription concerts to anyone who would pay to come. The subscription concerts we go to today in 21st century Canberra have their origins in Schuppanzigh's initiative here, and others like it in Europe and England at this time. Beethoven thought enough of Schuppanzigh's musical knowledge to follow the violinist's advice in the ordering of his first set of quartets, the opus 18 set of six, written between 1798 and 1800. In 1808, as I have already mentioned, the Count set up Schuppanzigh and three others as his quartet in residence, and for life: each of them had a salary until their death, which today would be thought superannuation of the most celestial kind. It was even more remarkable in early 19th century Vienna. What is more, Razumovsky placed the Schuppanzigh quartet at Beethoven's disposal. It was not surprising, therefore, that in dedicating his next set of string quartets, his opus 59 set of three, Beethoven should make a bow towards his musically literate and most generous benefactor, the Russian Ambassador.

What is so special and important about the Razumovsky quartets? Well, they are the most played of all the quartets, which says something. And they were written at a time of immense productivity. Just listen to the names of the compositions written around the opus 59 quartets: op.57 is the Appassionata Sonata for piano, op.58 is the 4th Piano Concerto, op.60 is the 4th Symphony and op 61 was the Violin Concerto; we know also that he was working on the 5th Symphony at this time too, though it was published some time later. I said earlier that the opus 18 set, written in the last years of the 18th century were very much of their period – indeed, Joseph Haydn was also working on his last string quartets at that time, and Beethoven hadn't heard them when he was writing the op 18 set. But in 1805/6 only a few years later, the Razumovsky Quartets are strikingly different to anything anyone else had written. Haydn was old and frail, and had given up composition, so he is now not a point of comparison. Back to the Razumovsky quartets. They are longer than Beethoven's earlier quartets, to start with. They

are written as concert pieces, intended for players as skilled as Schuppanzigh and his colleagues. The demands on the first violinist are especially high. The cello is prominent as an instrument in its own right, the compositions are dramatic and powerful, and they have an orchestral richness that is unlike his earlier works in this domain. The tension between head and heart, as somebody put it, is there from the beginning. They were not easy pieces for their Viennese audiences to listen to, and while they were respected (because Beethoven had star status in Vienna among the musical public) no one knew quite what to make of them. **(ILLUSTRATE)**

As I said, we will hear the 3rd Razumovsky quartet tonight and, though it was the last of the set, it was by no means the last of Beethoven's string quartets. Two more, opp. 74 ('the Harp') and 95 ('Serioso'), conventionally fall into his middle period because they were written in 1809 and 1810. Then there is the great creative silence, brought about mostly because of Beethoven's personal anguish, his failure to find a woman to marry, the endless legal, financial and emotional troubles connected with his guardianship of his nephew Karl, the consequences of the French occupation of Vienna in 1809, and periods of great ill-health. Comparatively little was written between about 1812 and 1822, years that separately mark the composition of the 8th Symphony and of the 9th Symphony. His next quartet, op. 127, was composed in 1823/4, only a very few years before his death in 1827.

In those very few years he composed another four quartets, and these late-period quartets are among his most important works. Why? Well, first, each of them (and that includes the two middle-period works composed after the Razumovsky set) were conceived and published as individual works: no more did Beethoven publish his pieces in sets, which had been the convention. Second, they almost the only works he completed in the last three years of his life. Third, they are 'personal' works — intended for performance, certainly (and the Schuppanzigh quartet premiered most of them), but much more expressive of the composer's interest in the development of his own craft than directed to the likely interest of an audience.

In this respect they have had two consequences right down to our time. One is the important part played by the late quartets in the creation of the 'artist as hero' myth: the notion that in some huge and elemental way Beethoven represented the suffering of the genius in the creation of great art. How do they produce that effect, you might well ask? Well, they depart in various ways from the form of the string quartet that had become the rule (music always seems to be governed by rules which are created in one generation only to be broken in the next). For example, the number of movements in each piece varies; some movements have several speeds; one has seven movements which flow continuously into one another; the last has elements of self-parody. They are very different to what he

had written earlier, and audiences found them difficult, unsure what to make of the powerful contrasts and the incongruity of the sublime being followed by the jokey or earthy. Some people still find them difficult, at least at the first hearing. One of the quartets, the op.131, has been orchestrated for symphonic strings, and I think that version (Leonard Bernstein conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra) is splendid. The op. 131 quartet has been described as Beethoven's finest quartet and even his finest work. **(ILLUSTRATE)** Old, ill, deaf and cranky, Beethoven in his last works produced some simply wonderful music, and that might be enough on its own to give these quartets a special place in music.

In fact that reason leads to the other — that the string quartet embodying the artist's innermost and perhaps most elevated thoughts has since captured the attention of other composers, and that has helped to give the string quartet as a piece of music a special status.

A good example of this last point is provided by the string quartets of the 20th century Russian composer Dmitry Shostakovich. Many of his orchestral works seem to have been written to order, so to speak, in that he was aware that they would be critically inspected by the musical commissars of the Soviet Union. His 4th Symphony of 1935 was in fact so criticised by the commissars that Shostakovich withdrew it from performance. In the same year he began his first string quartet, and the quartets became for him the place where he felt free to express his musical creativity without let or hindrance. Having said that, it is also true that just because this was so, and because the musically savvy Soviet population could read into his quartets much of what he felt, these quartets had a tremendous standing within the Soviet Union! The 8th Quartet, indeed, includes Shostakovich own initials D-S-C-H (in the German style, where S is E flat and H is B), and contains many personal references, including a chilling knocking rhythm, which is thought to be his fear of the secret police one day knocking on his door. **(ILLUSTRATE)** It is one of my most favourite pieces of music, and it has been described as the best string quartet written in the 20th century. He too, incidentally, had the great good fortune to work with the best string quartet in the Soviet Union, more or less at his pleasure. Their name immortalises the composer who, more than any other, has given this musical form its prominence and status. They called themselves the Beethoven String Quartet. And, like the Schuppanzigh quartet in the early 19th century, they premiered many of the composer's quartets, and felt that it was an extreme honour that they did so.

*(copyright Don Aitkin, 2005)*

Sorry, I no longer know what bits I played to the audience.