



Hamilton

The New Zealand String Quartet play the complete Beethoven Quartets

12, 13, 19, 20, 26 & 27 May 2000

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Five years ago the ambitious New Zealand String Quartet gave the first complete cycle of the Bartók quartets in this country to great acclaim. Now they have made an assault on perhaps the highest chamber music peak—the complete Beethoven string quartets. The undertaking was as demanding as it was bold, and the preparations the NZSQ had made for the cycle, by playing many of the individual works repeatedly over a period of years previously, paid dividends. This magnificent series of concerts was notable for the confidence of approach, for the knowing interplay of voices and for the sense of overall shape revealed in each work.

The cycle was presented over three weeks as a series of paired concerts on successive nights—in Hamilton they were Fridays and Saturdays. The NZSQ—and Hamilton Chamber Music—paid the musical public the honour of expecting it to share the daring, persistence and concentration needed to succeed in such a major project. That faith was well rewarded with generally sizeable and appreciative audiences. Indeed, as the series progressed, audience numbers grew until a large and expectant house was present for the final evening.

In planning the programmes for the series, the NZSQ elected to pursue a roughly chronological progression, but

with some variation within that to allow a variety of character within each concert. This turned out to be a wise choice, especially concerning the early works. It was with the Opus 18 set of six quartets that Beethoven began his engagement with the medium when in his late twenties. Obviously aware of Haydn's achievement in particular, Beethoven picked up the classical forms and structures perfected by Haydn and Mozart, but immediately personalised them. His confidence and individuality in the demanding and artistically exposed medium of the string quartet was never in doubt. A famous story reported by Ries tells how a friend ventured to comment to the young composer that there was a bar of parallel fifths in the quartet Op. 18 no 4 in C minor. Beethoven responded by demanding to know what exactly was wrong with that. The friend suggested that the rules of composition did not permit them. Beethoven replied: 'Then I permit them!' Such self-confidence proved to be solidly founded.

In a spoken introduction, cellist Rolf Gjelsten stressed his sense of the compositional elegance prevailing in the Op. 18 set, and the NZSQ appeared to aim for a sweetness of tone and a galante approach in them. Generally this worked well, but occasionally one could have wished for a more Haydnesque spirit of mercurial lightness, humour and surprise rather than the more suave Mozartian charm the performances conveyed. The minuet in Op. 18 no. 4, for instance, came across as being slightly under tempo and a bit under projected as a consequence.

The playing came into its own in mid-period pieces like the Rasumovsky Quartet Op. 59 no.1. Here was playing simply to enjoy; one could allow one's attention to follow the intricacies and turns of the music without hindrance of any kind. Best of all in the middle works was Op. 74, the 'Harp'. This was given a simply terrific performance, reiterating beyond words what a stupendously conceived and executed composition it is. We were treated to quartet playing of a very high order indeed in this piece.

As well as being fascinated by the journey itself through the cycle, traversing as it did most of Beethoven's creative life, many listeners probably were looking forward to having the chance to hear all the late quartets played in succession to round out the series. This proved to be as consciousness changing as one might expect. The works themselves were revealed as perpetually new and fresh, just as Stravinsky had noted early in the twentieth century. Most remarkable perhaps was the final Quartet, Op. 135. The lightness and beauty of this extraordinary piece was wonderfully conveyed by the NZSQ, and it hangs still in the memory. Op.135 is a miracle of ingenuity, sophistication and experience articulated within a transparent neoclassical formal framework. The performance managed to convey all that—as a listener one can't ask for much more!

The huge Quartet of Op. 132 which includes the 'Song of Thanksgiving' was marred slightly in places by intonation problems. One had the impression the players understandably—may have been becoming a little tired towards end of this, the fifth concert. On the following night, though, there was a sense of refuelled energy for the conclusion of the series. A highlight was to hear for a second time Op. 130, this time with the original Große Fuge as the final movement. When played in the fourth concert this work was given with its later, alternative ending. The heart-warming Cavatina preceding the final movement was played with noticeably more freedom when the Große Fuge was to follow it. That was appropriate, as its inward beauty largely is obliterated in one's memory by the monstrous energy and demonic scale of the fugue when that is used to conclude the work. On the other hand, when the straightforward rondo that Beethoven wrote as a substitute

ending is used, it is actually the Cavatina which lingers most clearly in our thoughts.

The concert series was supported with a well produced booklet of writings about the music and its background, including interesting and well-judged programme notes from Susannah Lees-Jeffries.

At the conclusion of the final concert the audience rose to its feet in a prolonged ovation—not so much to applaud this particular concert as out of grateful recognition for the playing of the whole cycle. It was a gesture genuinely felt and richly deserved.