

**PROGRAM NOTES**  
**BY ERIC BROMBERGER**

**String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95 “Serioso”**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

This quartet has a nickname, “*Quartetto Serioso*,” that — quite unusually for a musical nickname — came from the composer himself. Well aware of the music’s extraordinary character, Beethoven described the quartet as having been “written for a small circle of connoisseurs and ... never to be performed in public.” Joseph Kerman has described it as “an involved, impassioned, highly idiosyncratic piece, problematic in every one of its movements, advanced in a hundred ways” and “unmatched in Beethoven’s output for compression, exaggerated articulation, and a corresponding sense of extreme tension.” Yet this same quartet — virtually the shortest of Beethoven’s string quartets — comes from the same period as the easily accessible “*Archduke*” *Trio*, the *Seventh* and *Eighth Symphonies* and the incidental music to Goethe’s *Egmont*. Beethoven was approaching his fortieth birthday when he completed the quartet in the fall of 1810, and this music’s extraordinary focus and tension seem sharply at odds with those other, more popular scores. Beethoven was at this time nearing the end of his second period of composition, sometimes called his “Heroic Style,” but some critics hear in this quartet prefigurations of his late style and the great cycle of quartets written during his last years.

The first movement is extraordinarily compressed (it lasts barely four minutes), and it catapults listeners through an unexpected series of key relationships. The unison opening figure is almost spit out, passing through and ending in a “wrong” key, and then followed by complete silence. Octave leaps and furious restatements of the opening figure lead to the swaying second theme, announced in flowing triplets by the viola. The development section of this (highly modified) sonata-form movement is quite short, treating only the opening theme, before the movement exhausts itself on fragments of that theme.

The marking of the second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, might seem to suggest some relief, but this movement is even more closely argued than the first. The cello’s strange descending line introduces a lovely opening melody, but this quickly gives way to a long and complex fugue, its sinuous subject announced by the viola and then taken up and developed by the other voices. A quiet close (derived from the cello’s introduction) links this movement to the third, a violent fast movement. Note the marking: Beethoven once again stresses *Allegro assai vivace ma serioso*. The movement is in ABABA form, the explosive opening section alternating with a chorale-like subject for the lower three voices which the first violin decorates. Once again, Beethoven takes each section into unexpected keys. The last movement has a slow introduction — *Larghetto espressivo* — full of the darkness that has marked the first three movements, and this leads to a blistering finale that does much to dispel the tension. In an oft-quoted remark about the arrival of this theme, American composer Randall Thompson is reported to have said: “No bottle of champagne was ever uncorked at a better moment.” In contrast, for example, to the near-contemporary *Seventh Symphony*, which ends in wild celebration, this quartet has an almost consciously anti-heroic close, concluding with a very fast coda that Beethoven marks simply *Allegro*.

Many commentators have felt that the *Quartet in F minor* is composed with the same technique as the late quartets but without their sense of spiritual elevation, and in this sense they see the present quartet as looking ahead toward the late style. But it is unfair to this music to regard it simply as a forerunner of another style. This quartet may be dark, explosive, and extremely concentrated — but it should be valued for just those qualities.

### **String Quartet No. 2 in A major, Op. 68**

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

The works Shostakovich composed during World War II — or, as the Russians call it, the Great Patriotic War — form a distinct chapter in his output. These include the wartime music one might expect—marches, choruses, and even settings of songs of Russia’s allies (including, in 1943, an arrangement of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*) — but Shostakovich made his major wartime statements in classical forms. The wide expressive range of these works is best outlined by the path from the “*Leningrad*” *Symphony* of 1941 — a popular, heroic, and somewhat bombastic work — to the *Eighth Symphony* of 1943, searing, painful music that is a more direct response to the war. Shostakovich also wrote two chamber works during the war, both composed at the retreat the Soviet Union maintained for its composers in the forest of Ivanovo, north of Moscow. The *Piano Trio No. 2* and the *String Quartet No. 2* were composed during the summer of 1944 and premiered at the same concert in Leningrad on November 12 of that year.

These two works come from the darker side of Shostakovich’s wartime experience. The *Trio* is one of his finest and most frequently performed works. It was composed at just the point advancing Soviet soldiers had begun to discover the atrocities that had been committed against Russian Jews by the Nazis, and some of that makes its way into the trio’s harrowing final movement, which is based on what Shostakovich himself called a “Jewish theme.” The character of the *Second String Quartet* is more elusive, and it has remained one of the least-known of the cycle of Shostakovich’s fifteen string quartets. This quartet makes no direct reference to the war. There are no music quotations, no subtitle, no connections by Shostakovich himself to the events swirling about him as he composed it. Yet this is big music (nearly 35 minutes long), dark, powerful, at times dissonant, and it is hard not to feel some of the same spirit in this quartet that runs through the *Eighth Symphony* and *Second Piano Trio*.

The quartet is in the expected four movements, and at first glance these seem fairly conventional: a sonata-form first movement, a slow movement, a dance movement, and a theme-and-variation finale. But none of these movements is quite what one expects, and the impact of this music is unsettling rather than reassuring. Each of the movements has a title. The opening *Overture*, in sonata form, employs thematic material that can turn aggressive and dissonant, and it drives to a conclusion that relaxes none of its tensions. The *Recitative and Romance* opens with a long fantasia by the first violin over unbarred chordal accompaniment; its central episode, reflective at first, gradually turns strident before the return of the opening recitative. The *Waltz* is muted throughout. Second violin and viola pulse a ghostly suggestion of the waltz rhythm, and the cello quickly sings the sinuous waltz tune. This waltz offers several episodes in different characters and keys, some of them quite busy, before the return of the opening material and a quiet close. The variation-finale opens with a slow, rising-and-falling theme-shape. This shape then crystalizes into the viola’s lengthy solo statement (quite “Russian”-sounding), and four extended variations follow at different speeds. The writing can be virtuosic here, and at moments some of the aggressive character of the opening movement reappears. At the end, the slow theme-shape from the movement’s opening returns, and the quartet closes on a full-throated restatement of the variation theme and a firm A-minor chord.

### **String Quartet in C major, Op. 59, No. 3**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

The three string quartets of Beethoven’s Op. 59 were commissioned by Count Andreas Razumovsky — the Russian ambassador to Vienna and an accomplished violinist — brilliantly scored, adventurous harmonically, and conceived on a scale of grandeur previously unknown in quartet writing. The breadth of their conception has led to their being called “symphonic quartets,” and it is no surprise that they met with little popular or critical success — no one had ever heard quartets like these before.

The *Quartet in C major* opens in an aural fog: purposely obscuring both harmony and rhythm, Beethoven cuts the listener adrift and leaves him struggling for some sense of direction. Then the first violin leaps out brightly with the opening theme of the *Allegro vivace* and establishes the clear tonality of C major. Note carefully the violin's first two notes: the rise of a half-step will unify the entire first movement. The first violin has so prominent a role that this movement has something of the feel of a violin concerto: that virtuoso part, often in a very high register, dominates this sonata-form movement, while the other three voices are frequently relegated to the role of accompanists. The music arrives at a moment of stasis before one of Beethoven's shortest codas: the cello's half-step rises launch a rapid chromatic stringendo to the final cadence.

The *Andante*, one of Beethoven's most effective slow movements, opens with a *forte* pizzicato from the cello, and the first violin outlines the brooding A-minor theme that will dominate the movement. A surprising feature of the *Andante* is that the steady tread of six eighth-notes per measures continues almost throughout, but rather than becoming monotonous, this measured pace takes on a force of its own, particularly as it is reinforced by Beethoven's imaginative and expressive use of cello pizzicato. A second theme — in C major — lightens the mood somewhat, but the tone of the *Andante* remains dark and restless. Once again, the first violin rises high above the other instruments, often in passages of almost aching beauty.

In contrast to the intense *Andante*, the *Menuetto* can seem lightweight. Vincent D'Indy sneered that it is "a return to the style of 1796," and it is true that the movement lacks the originality of the two movements that surround it. But if the music can seem lightweight, it agreeably lessens the tension between the powerful movements on either side of it, and Beethoven makes piquant contrast between the flowing legato of the minuet and the sharply articulated staccato of the trio. Rather than conclude with a simple *da capo*, Beethoven writes out a coda that leads without pause to the final movement.

The finale explodes to life with a brilliant fugue introduced by the viola. This movement has been called a fugue, but that is inaccurate: only the beginning is fugal — the remainder is in sonata form. The most impressive aspect of this movement is its relentless energy: the finale is virtually a perpetual motion for four virtuoso players. One of its most memorable sequences occurs in the development: each of the instruments is in turn given a brilliant eight-measure passage (based on the final measure of the fugue theme) that simply goes up and comes down the scale. But Beethoven specifies that each instrument must remain on one string, and the result is a brief but dazzling cadenza for each instrument as the others accompany. It is gloriously apt quartet writing, and the effect in performance is breathtaking. There are few finales in Beethoven — or anywhere else — full of such headlong energy, and the music finally hurtles to a cadence. But it is a false cadence, as if Beethoven is unwilling to quit too soon. The music tentatively resumes, then speeds ahead and — set off by a lovely counter-theme in the second violin — races to the end of one of Beethoven's most exciting finales.