

RAZUMOVSKY QUARTET

Saturday 10 April, 2pm and 4.30pm
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

TSO musicians perform chamber music

Sercan Danis violin

Lucy Carrig-Jones violin

Anna Larsen Roach viola

Ivan James cello

MOZART String Quartet in D, K 575 (26')

BEETHOVEN String Quartet in E minor, Op 59 No 2, 'Razumovsky' (38')

The year 1789 was a difficult one for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). There was a downturn in his concert activities, he had almost no major commissions in the offing and he was making precious little from the sale of his music. Deciding to look for work beyond Vienna and its immediate environs, Mozart made a two-month trip to Berlin in the spring. Upon his return, he composed three string quartets (his last essays in the genre), which may have been commissioned by the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II. The first of them is this work, the String Quartet in D, K 575 (which, like the other quartets in the group, sometimes goes by the nickname 'Prussian'). The opening movement, Allegretto, commences with a broad, lyrical melody based around the tonic triad of D. The amiable mood established at the outset pervades the entire movement. The second movement, Andante, which is in the key of A, opens with a closely written paragraph offering a succession of melodic ideas which are restated to varying degrees throughout the movement. The Menuetto brings a return to the key of D and the more lightly textured Trio is in G. Listen out for the prominent cello part in the Trio. Prussian King Wilhelm was a reasonably accomplished cellist which no doubt explains why Mozart brought the instrument to the foreground. The cello also delivers the theme at the start of the final movement, Allegretto. Like the melody at the start of the first movement, this theme is based around the tonic triad of D. It opens with a six-note 'hook' that is worked out extensively in the course of the movement. Also noteworthy is the rich interplay between all four instruments.

Comparing Mozart's treatment of the string quartet with that of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), we find that the latter enlarged the genre wherever possible. Obviously, the number and type of instruments remained the same (two violins, viola and cello), but Beethoven broadened the scope of the musical material. For instance, right at the start of the 'Razumovsky' Quartet No 2, the three upper instruments play dyads or triads (double- and triple-stopped notes), the dynamic range encompasses robust fortissimos and hushed pianissimos, all four movements are longer than in the 'Classical' quartet with more intense working-out of themes and motifs, and the musical material is frequently driven by a frenetic energy. It might be said that Beethoven brought orchestral sweep and dramatic tension to the string quartet (whether or not this was a good thing is a matter of personal taste). Musicians at the time were certainly puzzled by Beethoven's priorities. The 'Razumovsky' Quartet No 2 unfolds in four contrasting movements: a wide-ranging Allegro in E minor; an introspective slow movement (Molto adagio) in E major; a scherzo (Allegretto) that swings to off-beat phrasing; and a quicksilver Finale (Presto) which commences in the 'wrong' key of C before settling into the home key of E minor. The three 'Razumovsky' Quartets, which were composed in 1806, were dedicated to the Russian ambassador to Vienna, Count Razumovsky, who was himself a violinist. In recognition of the dedicatee's patrimony, Beethoven made some use of Russian folk melodies. In this quartet, the Russian-derived tune appears in the trio section (Maggiore) of the third movement.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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