

Precis

BEETHOVEN & BRITTEN

Saturday 14 May, 11am & 2.30pm, Woolmers Estate, Longford

Tasmanian String Quartet

Emma McGrath violin

Jennifer Owen violin

Douglas Coghill viola

Jonathan Békés cello

BEETHOVEN String Quartet No 16 in F, Op 135 (26')

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai e cantante tranquillo

Grave ma non troppo tratto — Allegro

BRITTEN String Quartet No 2 in C, Op 36 (36')

Allegro calmo senza rigore

Vivace

Chacony

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was in failing health when, in the autumn of 1826, he composed his String Quartet Op 135. He had additional worries too – in the summer of the same year his nephew Karl had attempted suicide (Beethoven was Karl's legal guardian). Given the circumstances, you might expect Op 135 to be predominantly gloomy and introspective when, in fact, it is frequently jocular and light-hearted. It is often pointed out that in length, structure and scope, it more closely resembles Beethoven's Op 18 quartets (or, indeed, Haydn's quartets) than the experimental quartets that preceded it (Opp 127, 130, 131, 132 and 133). The opening Allegretto, for instance, is light and transparent (gone are the quasi-orchestral effects that had long been a feature of Beethoven's quartet writing). And the second movement, Vivace, is surely one of Beethoven's wittiest scherzos, with musical gestures flying about, running around in circles and getting tangled in syncopated knots. Then comes a meditative slow movement – a 'gentle song', according to the direction at the head of the score. The key should be noted: D-flat major, which is the flattened sixth degree of the scale of the home key of F. For a generation or more, the key of the flattened sixth had signified something out of the ordinary, a marker of a shift to the outer limits. The movement is in theme and variations form, not that this is immediately apparent. The finale is noteworthy for a number of things, not least that Beethoven placed words over two of the principal gestures – 'Muss es sein?' (Must it be?) over the viola and cello motif at the start, and 'Es muss sein!' (It must be!) over the jolly principal theme of the Allegro, which arrives about a minute later. Added to that, the entire movement is prefaced with the inscription 'Der schwer gefasste Entschluss' (The very difficult decision). The million-dollar question is: what exactly is the 'it' in 'It must be'? Much ink has been spilt over the issue with theories ranging from the profound to the jovial (all of them convincing). In any case, Op 135 closes with an affirmative, upbeat coda in the home key of F. Thus ends Beethoven's last completed work. He died in March the following year.

The year 1945 was a momentous one for English composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). The phenomenal success of the opera *Peter Grimes* in June cemented his reputation as one of the day's leading composers. November 1945 saw the première of his String Quartet No 2. The date is significant – 21 November, the 250th anniversary of the death of the composer Henry Purcell, a composer whose spirit hovers over much of the Second Quartet. The opening movement, Allegro calmo senza rigore, is based upon three themes introduced consecutively at the start, each commencing with the interval of a rising 10th. Note the use of drones in the inner parts, most likely a Purcellian touch. All instruments are muted in the quicksilver scherzo, which layers robust unison melody and arching spiccato figuration. The finale, a chaconne (Britten chooses the antiquated spelling 'chacony') is a massive set of variations (this is the longest movement of the three). Note the 'ground' presented at the opening as it forms the building block for the entire movement

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2022

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