Beethoven’s Theatrical Quartets

Beethoven’s middle-period quartets, Opp. 59, 74 and 95, are pieces that engage deeply with the aesthetic ideas of their time. In the first full contextual study of these works, Nancy November celebrates their uniqueness, exploring their reception history and early performance. In detailed analyses, she explores ways in which the quartets have both reflected and shaped the very idea of chamber music and offers a new historical understanding of the works’ physical, visual, social and ideological aspects. In the process, November provides a fresh critique of three key paradigms in current Beethoven studies: the focus on his late period; the emphasis on ‘heroic’ style in discussions of the middle period; and the idea of string quartets as ‘pure’, ‘autonomous’ artworks, cut off from social moorings. Importantly, this study shows that the quartets encompass a new lyric and theatrical impetus, which is an essential part of their unique, explorative character.

Nancy November lectures in musicology at the University of Auckland. Her research and teaching interests centre on the music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Her recent publications include essays on the early performance of Beethoven’s string quartets, and their performance history in the recording age. She has also published aesthetic and analytical studies of Haydn’s music, considering contexts of musical melancholy (Eighteenth-Century Music, 2007), the use of register in his string quartets (Music Analysis, 2008) and conceptions of ‘voice’ in his early string quartets (Music and Letters, 2008). Her edition of Adalbert Gyrowetz’s String Quartets Op. 29 is forthcoming, and an edition of six sextets by Paul Wranitzky was published in 2012. Her awards include an Edison Fellowship from the British Library, an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship, and a Marsden grant from the New Zealand Royal Society. She is currently editing a three-volume set of fifteen string quartets by Beethoven’s contemporary Emmanuel Aloys Förster.
The aim of Music in Context is to illuminate specific musical works, repertoires or practices in historical, critical, socio-economic or other contexts; or to illuminate particular cultural and critical contexts in which music operates through the study of specific musical works, repertoires or practices. A specific musical focus is essential, while avoiding the decontextualisation of traditional aesthetics and music analysis. The series title invites engagement with both its main terms; the aim is to challenge notions of what contexts are appropriate or necessary in studies of music, and to extend the conceptual framework of musicology into other disciplines or into new theoretical directions.

BOOKS IN THE SERIES

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NANCY NOVEMBER, Beethoven’s Theatrical Quartets: Opp. 59, 74 and 95
Beethoven’s Theatrical Quartets

Opp. 59, 74 and 95

NANCY NOVEMBER
## Contents

*List of illustrations*  [page vi]
*List of music examples*  [vii]
*List of tables*  [xii]
*Acknowledgements*  [xii]

**Introduction**  [1]

1 *Setting the scene: theories, practices and the early nineteenth-century Viennese string quartet*  [8]

2 *Curtain up: performing the middle-period quartets in Beethoven’s time*  [39]

3 ‘Not generally comprehensible’: Op. 59 No. 1 and the drama of becoming  [50]

4 ‘With much feeling’: song, sensibility and rhapsody in Op. 59 No. 2  [91]

5 ‘Helden-Quartett’: genre, innovation and ‘heroic’ voices in Op. 59 No. 3  [124]

6 ‘Freudvoll und leidvoll’: songful impetus and dualistic voice in the ‘Harp’ Quartet  [167]

7 ‘The quick-witted brevity of the genuine dramatist’: Op. 95 and the idea of the fragment  [202]

8 *A tale of heroic emancipation? Reception narratives for the middle-period quartets*  [235]

*Select bibliography*  [255]

*Index*  [271]
Illustrations

1.1 Johann Carl Arnold, *Quartettabend bei Bettina von Arnim* (1855), watercolour (© Freies Deutsches Hochstift – Frankfurter Goethe-Museum) [page 15]

1.2 Ferdinand Schmutzer, *Das Joachim-Quartett beim Musizieren* (1904), etching (courtesy of Beethoven-Haus, Bonn) [16]

1.3 First violin high register antics from Adalbert Gyrowetz’s String Quartet in E flat major, Op. 29 No. 1, finale, bars 327–35 (Offenbach: André, c. 1799–1800) (© Archiv Musikverlag Johann André, Offenbach Germany) [19]

1.4 August Borckmann, *Beethoven und das Rasumowsky’sche Quartett* (photographic reproduction from 1880–90 of the original painting of 1872. Courtesy of Beethoven-Haus, Bonn) [28]

2.1 Beethoven, String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, movement four, bars 40–1, autograph score (courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna) [45]

4.1a Beethoven, String Quartet in E minor, Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, bars 153–5 and 161–4 autograph score, showing crossed out draft of bars 156–8 (courtesy of Staatsbibliothek, Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung, Mendelssohn-Archiv) [100]

4.1b Beethoven, String Quartet in E minor, Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, bars 156–60, autograph score (courtesy of Staatsbibliothek, Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung, Mendelssohn-Archiv) [100]

5.1a Beethoven, String Quartet in C major, Op. 59 No. 3, movement three, bars 88–92, autograph score, with two crossed out drafts of the movement’s conclusion (courtesy of Beethoven-Haus, Bonn) [156]

5.1b Beethoven, String Quartet in C major, Op. 59 No. 3, movement three, bars 93–4, autograph score (courtesy of Beethoven-Haus, Bonn) [156]

8.1 Average metronome marking for twenty-six recordings of Beethoven’s String Quartet in F major, Op. 59 No. 1 [252]
Music examples

2.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement four, bar 157 (first violin)  [page 42]
2.2 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bar 32 (viola)  [42]
2.3 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement four, bars 39–46 (first violin)  [42]
2.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement four, bars 420–2 (first violin)  [42]
2.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement four, bars 40–1  [45]
2.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement one, bars 189–91 (F. David edition, first violin)  [48]
3.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement one, bars 1–19  [57]
3.2 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement one, bars 236–42  [61]
3.3 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement one, bars 252–4  [61]
3.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement two, bars 225–31  [67]
3.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement three, bars 1–10  [72]
3.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement three, bars 21–3  [73]
3.7 Beethoven, Fidelio, Op. 72, Act II No. 12/11, bars 11–14  [74]
3.8 Beethoven, Fidelio, Act II No. 12/11, bars 21–4  [76]
3.9 Beethoven, Fidelio (1805/6 version), Act II No. 12, bars 74–9  [80]
3.10 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement four, bars 1–22  [85]
3.11 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement four, bars 310–23  [87]
4.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, bars 1–7  [95]
List of music examples

4.2 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, bars 70–6 [96]
4.3a Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, crossed out draft of bars 156–8 [101]
4.3b Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement one, bars 153–60 [102]
4.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bars 1–8 [106]
4.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bars 63–4 [110]
4.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bars 68–70 [110]
4.7 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bars 138–45 [112]
4.8 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement two, bars 150–7 [113]
4.9 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement three, bars 110–22 [116]
4.10 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement four, bars 89–107 [120]
4.11 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, movement four, bars 232–5 [121]
5.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement one, bars 1–29 [129]
5.2 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement one, bars 29–40 [132]
5.3 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement one, bars 40–3 [133]
5.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement one, bars 51–7 [134]
5.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement one, bars 42–8 [135]
5.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement one, bars 357–9 [135]
5.7 Anon. Lied, 'Ty wospoi, wospoi, mlad Shaworontschek' (Singe, sing' ein Lied/Sing, sing a song) [138]
5.8 Beethoven, Fidelio, Act II No. 13/12, bars 1–6 [139]
List of music examples

5.9 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement two, bars 1–6 [141]
5.10 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement two, bars 23–31 [142]
5.11 Beethoven, Fidelio, Act I No. 11/10, bars 296–300 [145]
5.12 J. Haydn, String Quartet in G major, Op. 54 No. 1, movement two, bars 15–20 [147]
5.13 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement two, bars 49–51 [147]
5.14 Beethoven, Fidelio, Act II No. 12, bars 12–16 [149]
5.15 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement two, bars 197–204 [151]
5.16 Beethoven, Fidelio, Act II No. 12, bars 103–5 [152]
5.17 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement three, bars 71–3 [155]
5.18a Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement three, second crossed out draft of the movement’s conclusion [157]
5.18b Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement three, bars 88–94 [157]
5.19 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement four, bars 176–80 [159]
5.20 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 59 No. 3, movement four, bars 206–10 [160]
6.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement one, bars 1–4 [178]
6.3 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement one, bars 125–39 [182]
6.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement two, bars 1–9 [185]
6.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement two, bars 24–31 [186]
6.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement two, bars 106–11 [188]
6.7 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement two, bars 150–5 [189]
6.8 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement three, bars 78–95 [191]
6.9 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement four, bars 106–9 (Variation 5) [194]
6.10 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement four, bars 128–31 (Variation 6) [197]
6.11 Beethoven, Egmont, No. 8 (Melodrama), bars 21–2 (strings) [199]
List of music examples

6.12 Beethoven, *Egmont*, No. 8 (Melodrama), bars 44–5  [200]
7.1 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement one, bars 140–4  [204]
7.2 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement one, bars 1–9  [211]
7.3 Beethoven, *Egmont*, No. 1 ‘Die Trommel gerühret!’, bars 79–82 (second violin)  [213]
7.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement one, bars 54–61  [214]
7.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement one, bars 75–6  [215]
7.6 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement one, bars 127–30  [217]
7.7 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement two, bars 180–92  [222]
7.8 Beethoven, *Egmont*, Andante agitato in E flat from the fourth Zwischenakt, bars 20–4 (strings)  [227]
7.9 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement four, bars 8–12  [227]
7.10 Beethoven, *Egmont*, Overture, bars 279–88  [229]
7.11 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement four, bars 131–4  [231]
8.1 R. Schumann, Piano Quartet in E flat major, Op. 47, movement one, bars 1–20  [237]
8.2 R. Schumann, Piano Quartet in E flat major, Op. 47, movement three, bars 48–51  [239]
8.3 F. Mendelssohn, String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13, movement two, bars 1–16  [241]
8.4 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, movement four, bars 1–2  [242]
8.5 Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 74, movement two, bars 13–17  [242]
Tables

3.1 Six modern analysts’ views of the form of Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1, movement two  [page 64]
4.1 Structure of the first group in Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 59 No. 2, finale  [119]
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