

String Trio in C minor op.9 no.3

Ludwig von Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Adagio. Allegro con brio
Adagio, ma non tanto, e catabile
Scherzo: allegro
Presto

In October 1792 Beethoven left his home town of Bonn and journeyed to Vienna, where he was to spend the rest of his life. His purpose was to study with Haydn in the city that was pre-eminent in the musical world of Europe at that time, but he was to establish himself first as a performer, which he did with gusto. He would take part in what would later be known in jazz circles as 'cutting contests' after one of which an eminent but defeated contestant reported "He (Beethoven) is a devil. He will play me and all of us to death. And how he improvises!"

By the end of the century Beethoven seemed to have everything going for him: he was an established artist, with a generous patron, Prince Lichnowsky; he had, in spite of his rebellious instincts towards him, learned much from Haydn; and he had had a number of his best compositions published. Had his impending deafness not prevented it he might well have pursued performance at the expense of composition, and we should have been much the poorer for that. But the affliction had begun. Amongst the works of Beethoven's 'Early Period' were five string trios, two of them divertimenti and three of more substantial form. He was never to write again in this form, but one can see, in op.9 at least, the qualities that would make him King of the string quartet in later years.

It is arguable that C minor was Beethoven's favourite key, and he certainly revels in its sonorities in the first movement, which bowls along very merrily, with plenty of the sort of moments that characterise the composer's later works. In fact it is difficult to think of this as an early work, so perfectly are the effects handled. The adagio is in C major, smilingly graceful with a more energetic middle section. We are back in C minor for the scherzo, full of rhythmic propulsion. The finale is no less sprightly, with a whirling figure that Beethoven has much fun with, and another joke in the self-effacing ending.